

We of the Mountains



We of the

Mountains

Armenian

Short Stories

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МЫ ВС НАШИ ТОР
СОВРЕМЕННАЯ АРМОНГКАН НОВЕЛЛ
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INTRODUCTION

The stories in this collection were written by nineteen Armenian authors. They are men of different generations, outlook and literary style. Some write about a definite event, others seek a philosophical assessment of life.

This is a collection and not an anthology. An anthology of Armenian short stories, which genre has a history of several hundred years in Armenian letters and whose writers have gone down in the annals of world culture, would call for a many-volume edition.

However, while presenting this collection, one cannot but mention several authors—not represented here—who were in their day landmarks in the history of Armenian short story writing. First among them is Khachatur Abovian. His short stories, written in the 1830s and 40s, were romantic, didactic and, at times, flowery in the true tradition of the East. They served to shape the short story into a literary genre which was soon to become one of the leading genres in Armenian letters. A bright galaxy of writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries played an important role in bringing about this blossoming of the short story. These were: Raffi, Gabriel Sundukian, Akop Paronian, Rafael Patkanian, Grigor Zograb, Yervand Otian and Perch Proshian.

It must be noted that from the very start there was no one trend in Armenian short story writing. This was due, in part, to the fact that this genre attracted writers of various social and literary outlook. Besides, these authors belonged to two disparate branches of Armenian letters, known as the Eastern and Western branches. The representatives of the Eastern branch, who lived on Russian territory, were more socially conscious than the Western Armenian

writers, who followed a different course, due to specific historic conditions.

This is what Nar-Dos wrote in his autobiography: "The words on my banner were 'Real life as it is and man's inner world.' " Many of Nar-Dos's contemporaries among the Eastern Armenian writers would have shared this motto with him. This signified the establishment of realism as a literary trend. It became firmly rooted in Armenian literature and was evident not only in the development of realistic themes, but in the writers' keen observation of the spiritual life of their people, in their expose of social contradictions and in their interest in moral and ethical problems. Thus, Nar-Dos presented the process of spiritual degradation and moral bankruptcy of the ruling classes and affirmed the viability of the working man, energetic, persevering and believing in his own strength.

At the turn of the century the psychological story, which reflected the characters' inner life under conditions of ever-deepening contradictions in society, came to play an important role in Armenian literature. The "little man" theme gained popularity, bringing to public notice a life that was truly dramatic and a fate that was tragic in its hopelessness. This theme, which in Russia came to be known as a "Chekhov story", received special emphasis in the work of Stefan Zorian ("Sad People", "The Inhabitants of the White House", etc.).

The history of the Armenian short story in the 20th century would be incomplete without mention of Hovannes Toumanian and Avetik Isaakian, two of the brightest stars in Armenian letters. Their great heritage is a synthesis of the best traditions of world literature and their own national art. A simplicity of style, humaneness, a deep understanding of the psychology, life, ways and customs of their people and their democratism have placed Hovannes Toumanian and Avetik Isaakian among the ranks of the world's outstanding writers. Valery Briusov called Toumanian's work an encyclopaedia of pre-revolutionary life in Armenia.

"My Friend Neso", a story by Toumanian included in this collection, was written as a remembrance of his childhood. It is characteristic of the writer's fervent protest against social injustice, which cripples a gifted personality.

Avetik Isaakian was a philosophical writer, with a marked preference for such themes as life and love. He sought to uncover the meaning of life and of love as one of its greatest manifestations. "Saadi's Last Spring" is a magnificent song to life, which is eternally beautiful and wondrous.

So, at the turn of the century, these two outstanding representatives of Armenian short story writing critically renounced the past and welcomed the morrow, the bright future of the Armenian people.

The Great October Socialist Revolution and the establishment of Soviet power in Armenia mark the beginning of a new era in Armenian literature. Now the voices of new heroes were to be heard, and new themes came to the fore. This new development was carried on by Derenik Demirchian, Stefan Zorian, Aksel Bakunts, and Movses Arazi, writers who had become established before the Revolution.

Stefan Zorian, a classic of Soviet Armenian literature, wrote about the fate of his native land and its people. A deep sense of history, combined with a keen understanding of contemporaneity, helped Zorian to portray the characteristic traits of modern man, the builder of a new way of life. The life-giving power of the Revolution, which brings forth the best in people, is portrayed in "The Girl from the Library".

The new heroes of the revolutionary epoch took their place in the work of Movses Arazi. "Comrade Mukuch", a landmark in its day, describes the awakening of the individual during the era of revolutionary change.

The work of Derenik Demirchian, another major writer of this period, is truly a chronicle of the history and life of the Armenian people. Demirchian was a poet, prose writer, playwright and journalist. He was always able to present life vividly, be it in a psychological sketch or an historic novel. "The Flowering of a Book", included in this volume, proclaims the immortality of a people's cultural treasures.

Aksel Bakunts is a prominent Soviet Armenian short story writer. His is the poetic image of Armenia, its breathtaking beauty, its proud and modest people. "The Alpine Violet", one of the gems of Armenian literature, presents a picture of the mountain regions of Armenia, the ways and customs of its people.

The modern Armenian short story has traversed a difficult road that began at the inception of the Revolution, continued through the fires of the Civil War, to the peaceful building of socialism in the 1930s. From 1941 to 1945 this road lay through the battles of the Great Patriotic War against fascism. The years of post-war rehabilitation have been succeeded by the peaceful, creative labour of the past two decades.

The works of Soviet Armenia's writers on the Great Patriotic War are imbued with true patriotism, humaneness and internationalism. Such is "Thirst" by Rachia Kochar, included in this collection.

The war ended. The changes that were taking place in the life of the people who were building a better tomorrow were reflected in the short story. Now the heroes of the war-time stories were returning home to peaceful labour, as does Armenak in Vigen Khechumian's story "The Bridge". War had taught Armenak that the road which leads one person to another is the most important road on earth.

The post-war Armenian short story deals with the ethical and moral life of the individual. Thus do the paths of the writers of the older generation meet with the younger generation, with those who had fought in the war and with those who had begun publishing their works in the post-war years. These are: Gurgen Maari, Sero Khanzadian, Vigen Khechumian, Rafael Aramian, Abig Avakian, Grant Matevosian, Vardkes Petrosian, Kamari Tonoian, Perch Zeitunians and Gevork Arshakian. The list could be extended, for now, as never before, Armenia can boast of a wealth of talented prose writers.

The personalities and social behaviour of young people born and raised in the post-war years, a generation that has not known the privations and suffering of war, is an important problem that is today engaging the attention of a large number of Armenian short story writers. This is perhaps an international theme in literature and the arts today. Armenian writers, as writers of the other Soviet Republics, teach the youth to be spiritually and ideologically alert, to have an attentive and responsible attitude towards life and to develop the features of a future builder of a communist society. This ethical conversation with the youthful reader will at times take a humorous turn, as in Khazhak Giulna-

zarian's story "The Sixth Commandment"; at others, it will be a satire, as in Vardkes Petrosian's "Good Morning, Jack".

Naturally, the task of educating the younger generation is but one of the many different tasks facing the Armenian short story today.

Ever new Armenian writers are turning to "minor prose". Armenian literature is rich in talent, as are the people who have created this literature. The Armenian people have passed through many trials in their two-thousand-odd year history until they finally took their fate and the future of their beautiful country into their own hands.

Grant Martirosian

Aksel Bakunts

THE ALPINE VIOLET

The top of Mt. Kagavaberda is draped in clouds the year round. White drifts hide the jagged walls of the castle, with tall black towers emerging here and there. From afar it seems that sentries are patrolling the ramparts, that the great iron doors of the castle are locked and that at any moment a guard might challenge a stranger scaling the mountain.

But when the wind scatters the clouds and the white shreds dissolve, first the leaning top of a tower appears and then the overgrown walls, half-buried in the earth. There are no iron gates, there are no sentries.

Silence reigns over the ruins of Kagavaberda. The only sound is that of the turbulent Basut in the canyon below as it rushes along, polishing the blue quartz of the narrow bedrock. It seems that a thousand wolfhounds are howling beneath the churning waters, gnawing away at their iron chains.

A hawk and a vulture have made their nests in the walls. At the first rustling footstep they fly up with wild cries and begin circling over the ruins. A mountain eagle joins them. Its beak is a curved sabre, its claws are pointed spears, its feathers are a coat of mail.

The only flower that grows so high on Kagavaberda is the violet. It is blood-red, with a stem as red as the feet of a ptarmigan. The flower blooms among the ruins. When the clouds lie low upon the gloomy castle walls, the stem bends low to let the flower lay its head upon a sun-drenched rock. A bright beetle, bathing in the pollen, sees the flower as a swing and the world as a crimson blossom.

Far below, in the canyon on the opposite bank of the Basut, are several huts. In the morning columns of smoke rise from the circular openings in the roofs. Dissolving into blue ribbons, they disappear among the clouds. In the heat of noon a cock might crow in the village; an old peasant, yawning in the shade of his house and lost in his memories, draws figures in the sand with a stick.

Time drags on both in the village and in the castle above. The years are like the changing leaves of a tree. Memories become confused. Now, as always, the river rushes by; above are the same rocks and the same mountain eagle.

How many generations have lived out their lives on the bank of the Basut? How many people have spread their tattered felt rugs here and covered their roofs with reeds? In spring, when the violet blooms on the slopes of Kagavaberda, how many have taken their goats and sheep up to the mountain pastures, then filled their saddle-bags with cheese, and, in winter, eaten it with bread made of millet?

* *

One hot noon three men on horseback rode up the rocky slope of Kagavaberda. From their clothing and the way two of them sat in the saddle you could tell they were city men who had never seen the castle or the cliffs before.

The third man was their guide. While the first two clutched at their horses' manes and were practically bent over double to keep their seats, the third rider hummed a song as he swayed in the saddle, a song as melancholy and hopeless as the deserted canyon, as the gloomy cliff and the distant village.

The clouds that masked the castle would sometimes part like a curtain, now revealing walls, now covering the tops. The first rider could not tear his eyes from the walls. In his mind's eye he reviewed the legends about the castle, tales preserved in the parchment chronicles of the times when princes had ruled here, when horses in armour had trodden the path outside the iron gate and warriors brandishing their spears had returned from raiding parties. The eyes that peered through his glasses were those of a scholar. He could actually see the warriors and the chroniclers who

had sung their praises, their sharpened reeds scratching words on the parchment, he could hear the hoofbeats of those ancient steeds. How difficult it was for him to ride up the cliff which the former inhabitants of the castle had scaled as easily as mountain goats.

Finally, they reached the village. The first rider continued on his way. He was looking for the old road and noticed neither the children playing in the ashes of the campfires nor the goats that followed him with surprised eyes.

The second rider, a man in a felt hat, was not searching for the past on top of Kagavaberda. His possessions were a sharpened pencil and a thick drawing pad. As soon as a face or a charming corner with a moss-covered rock struck him he would begin to draw.

One rider was an archaeologist, the other was an artist. When they reached the first dwelling several dogs rushed out at them. Hearing the barking, some people appeared to stare at them from the doorways.

The children who were playing among the ashes watched the barking dogs chase after the horses. In vain did the guide try to shoo them off with his whip. The dogs accompanied them as far as the castle walls and only then did they turn back and race down again.

The stones of the castle seemed to come alive: they were talking to the archaeologist. He approached each stone, crouched down to search for something, then measured it, jotting in his notebook, digging in the dirt with the toe of his shoe to reveal yet another shaped stone. Finally, he climbed the wall and stuck his head through a loop-hole in the tower. At the sight of the writing hewn in the wall he exclaimed loudly.

The guide, who had dropped his reins and was sitting by the wall smoking, jumped to his feet at the sound of the shout. He thought the man in the glasses had been bitten by a snake.

The artist was sketching the ruins of the wall and the pointed tower. When he had drawn the entrance to the castle his pencil stopped in mid-air, for the vulture, alarmed at the sound of his steps, had flown out of its nest. Now it circled over the tower. The other birds followed with a great flapping of wings.

The frightened horses pressed close together. When the archaeologist shouted down that he had discovered the burial vault of Prince Bakur, the artist did not know what he was talking about. He was following the flight of the vultures, the powerful flapping of their wings, and was fascinated by their curved, blood-red beaks. There was something majestic in their circling.

He did not notice when his hat slipped off his head and fell on top of a rock.

A peasant with a sickle stuck in his belt, a dirty kerchief tied round his head and leaning on a staff climbed the rocky slope and approached the guide.

He had seen the man in the glasses move a rock. When he asked the guide who these strangers were and what they were looking for among the ruins, the man was at a loss for any explanation. Then he said that it was written in a book that a large pitcher of gold coins was buried somewhere on top of Kagavaberda.

The peasant was lost in thought. Then he shrugged and climbed back down to the canyon to reap his field of millet. He spoke to himself as he walked along. What a stroke of luck it would be if he were to find the hidden treasure. How often had he sat on the very rock the man in the glasses had moved. If he had only known about the treasure before his pockets would have jingled with gold. Ah, how many cows he could have bought... Thus occupied with his thoughts he reached his field. He took off his long jacket, cast aside the useless thoughts together with it, grasped a handful of millet and began to reap.

A violet was blooming among the ruins, but the archaeologist noticed neither the crimson flower nor the grass. All lay crushed beneath his boots.

The world to him was one great museum in which there was not a single living thing. He tore away the ivy that covered the rocks, with the tip of his stick he pulled out the violet that bloomed in the crevice and ran his hand lovingly over the stones, scraping away the dust that had eaten into the inscription. The artist, having sketched all the archaeologist was interested in, began to draw the ruins, the eagle's nest between the jagged rocks and the blooming violet at the foot of the wall.

They left the castle in the afternoon. Before starting down the archaeologist walked around the ruins once again, making notations in his pad. Then he walked quickly to catch up with the others.

This time the guide led the way. If the archaeologist was thinking about Prince Bakur and the parchment scrolls, if the artist was recalling the violet as he listened to the churning waters of the Basut, the guide dreamed only of a fresh flatcake, of goat cheese and yoghurt.

He unsaddled the horses at the first dwelling, hobbled them and entered through the narrow door. The hungry horses thrust their mouths greedily into the fresh grass.

Inside, sitting by the hearth near the entrance, was a small boy. He was roasting mushrooms in the hot ashes and was startled by the stranger. He did not know whether to run away, leaving his mushrooms to burn, or to pull them out of the ashes. At the approaching sound of his mother's bare feet he became bolder. Raking out a roasted mushroom, he set it to cool in one of the hearthstones.

His mother entered, pulled her kerchief down low over her eyes and went over to the corner. She extracted two pillows from a heap of bedding and proffered them to the visitors.

The guide took a tin of food from the archaeologist's knapsack.

"We are hungry, my sister," he said. "Would you give us some yoghurt, if you have any, and boil us some tea? We have our own sugar."

The woman went to the hearth, pushed the mushrooms out of the way and, bending low over the ashes, began to blow on them. The kerchief slipped from her head, revealing to the artist her white forehead, raven hair and dark eyes. He could not take his eyes from the smoking hearth and the woman bent over the ashes. Where had he seen this face before? It was the same marble brow, the same dark-violet eyes. When the woman rose to set a tripod over the fire her eyes and the white dust of ashes on her brows and hair were but inches away from him.

So many years had gone by! Could any two faces

be so alike? Even the shape of their mouths was the same.

This woman's face was tanned by the sun, but her eyes were the same as those of the other woman, they both had the same slim waist and lithe body. Moving swiftly and silently, the woman brewed their tea. Each time she bent, rose, or walked across the straw mats the silvery bangles on her sleeves tinkled like tiny bells and her long dress rustled softly.

The other woman had also worn dresses that rustled, but she had worn a grey coat and a black velvet hat with an orange hatpin as well.

That woman was very far away now. Perhaps the Basut, flowing into another river, did eventually reach the sea where he had once sat on the sandy beach beside the other woman.

The guide opened the second tin of food. The archaeologist kept looking at the cloth and at the copper utensils that were set on it. The boy ate his mushrooms and then looked in wonder at the shiny can, waiting for the strangers to empty it. The guide noticed his glance and handed it to him. The boy began to shake it. A dog that had been lying outside swallowed the remaining morsel of meat and licked its chops. Then the boy rushed off to show his friends the shiny white can, a sight unseen in these parts.

The woman sat by the hearth, picking up the lid of the kettle every so often to see whether the water had boiled. She fussed with the fire, moving the sticks closer together, protecting her eyes from the smoke that rose like a cloud and escaped through the cracks in the reed walls.

The woman by the hearth whose knees were clearly outlined beneath her long dress seemed to the artist to be a sorceress who could see the future in the billowing smoke.

The other woman had never walked barefoot and had never sat by a smoking hearth.

The sea had heaved like bronze lava in the mornings, licking the rocks along the shore. And the woman in the black velvet hat had sat on the beach, drawing lines in the sand with the tip of her parasol and then erasing them. He had been breaking bits off the dry twig in his hands. The waves, tossing foam at their feet, had washed the bits of

twig back into the sea. As they had sat there on the beach the woman had promised to marry him, and the world had suddenly become a boundless sea, with his heart a part of it.

Then other days had come. Life had torn them apart so suddenly. All that remained to him was the memory of her violet eyes, her grey coat and the tip of her parasol with which she had written and then erased her promise in the sand.

The lid rattled. The woman took some saucers from a basket and set some painted glasses on the cloth. When she bent over it her long braid slipped over her shoulder. The woman at the seashore had had short hair, a white neck and translucent skin.

The boy came running in, carrying the empty can.

A group of children now stood in the doorway, staring openly at the strangers. There was no end to the child's joy when he was given the second can. This time he did not run off, but sat down on a mat. His mother poured him some tea, and the artist dropped a large lump of sugar into his glass. The boy was fascinated by the bubbles rising from the sugar. He stuck his finger into the glass to fish it out. Though the hot tea burned his skin he did not utter a sound, for the melting sugar was delicious. The archaeologist smiled, having apparently recalled a scene from mankind's past. The woman filled the kettle again and smiled happily at her mischievous son.

Her smile did not escape the artist. It was so familiar. When people resemble each other, their smiles are similar, too. First, the woman's upper lip trembled, then her lips parted and the smile lit up her eyes.

The artist whipped his drawing pad from his pocket, leafed through the drawings of rocks and bas-reliefs, then deftly sketched the woman sitting by the fire.

The outline of her figure was familiar; in his mind's eye he had sketched it for many years.

No one but the boy saw the drawing in his pad. It seemed to the child that the white sheets of paper that belonged to the man in the felt hat mirrored every object, as did the clear waters of a spring.

A short while later the guide brought the horses by. He put on the bridles, tightened the bellybands, buckled on

the saddlebag and went back in to say goodbye to the woman. She rose and quickly pulled her kerchief down over her forehead. Her fingertips brushed against his outstretched hand. The other two also offered her their hands but she bade them farewell by pressing her hand to her heart and inclining her head.

The artist gave the boy a few silver coins and patted his head.

Three horses made their way down the rocky slope of Kagavaberda to the valley below. Each of the three men riding down the mountain was lost in his own thoughts.

The violets were in bloom along the roadside. The artist leaned over in his saddle, picked a flower and pressed it in his pad, on the page which had a drawing of a slim woman by a hearth.

Stones clattered under the horses' hooves and rattled down into the gorge.

A sea churned in the artist's mind. It would toss up on its shores first a pretty head in a black velvet hat, then a woman in a long dress with heavy braids hanging down her back, then the ruins of a castle and crimson flowers blossoming at the foot of its walls.

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Twilight had fallen.

A man was climbing the same road up the mountain. A sickle was stuck into his belt. The man was tired. All day long he had been reaping the short stalks of millet and his back ached. And so his steps were slow, he leaned heavily upon his staff and stopped frequently to catch his breath. His knees trembled whenever he stopped. It was the same Plan whom the guide had told about the buried treasure of the castle. He had looked up from his field to see the riders coming down. It had seemed to him that the gold was in their saddlebags, gold which had lain buried for centuries under the very same stone on which he had sat while his goats and sheep had grazed among the ruins. Either because this thought gave him no peace or because he was so tired, he was as irritable as a hungry bear out on its evening hunt.

When he reached the first dwelling he kicked aside the dog that ran out to greet him, pulled the sickle from his belt and flung it into a corner. Then, leaning his staff by the hearth, he sat down on the mat.

The fire was smoking. The kettle was boiling. Two lumps of sugar lay on a pillow.

Before the reaper had time to take off his bast slippers and shake the chaff out of them, his wife entered. The bangles on her sleeves tinkled, and the folds of her long dress rustled. Her son hung on to her skirt, clutching the empty cans.

He ran up to his father to show him his treasures. Suddenly the man realised that the riders had been sitting on his mat. Then the boy showed him the silver coins the kind stranger had given him.

The man brushed the child away and threw down the cans. They rolled off, as did the boy. But the child jumped to his feet and picked them up again. Then he buried his face in his mother's skirt and wept. The father felt sorry for him. He called to him and asked to see the coins. The child came over, smiling through his tears, the coins clenched in his fist. Then he told his father that the stranger had had something shiny with white pages in his pocket. The man who had given him the coins had carried off a picture of his mother on one of the pages.

Jealousy, like a bolt of lightning, rent the peasant's seething soul. He opened his eyes wide. He turned pale. The woman looked at her son and flushed; her husband noticed the colour rising to her cheeks. The next moment he was on his feet. His hairy hands grabbed the heavy staff and brought it down across the woman's back.

Her buttons tinkled, her long braids were cast aside. The kettle tipped over. The broken end of the staff flew off into a corner. The woman did not cry out, she merely writhed in pain. Holding her hand to her back she went out of the house, there to weep. The child followed her, still clutching the cans, and hid among her skirts.

The husband, grumbling all the while, had some millet cakes, then put his sheepskin hat under his head and stretched out on the mat.

Once again silence fell on Mt. Kagavaberda. The fires in the hearths died down as the blackness of night

descended. The village dogs, shivering in fear of wild beasts, curled up outside the dwellings. The sheep lay down in the grass. The woman lay down on a mat, covering the child with a length of felt.

A cloud, like some giant snail, crawled down the mountain towards the huts.

Darkness covered the moss and the rocks as the dampness of night settled on the fleece of the sleeping sheep.

Dew fell upon the petals of the violet. A tiny beetle, heady from its fragrance, slept in the flower cup. And it seemed to the beetle that the world was a fragrant violet.

Derenik Demirchian

THE FLOWERING OF A BOOK

***The hand that wrote this will
turn to dust,
But the book will live on
through the ages.***

Flowers were lights and fruits were precious stones. Thus did he imagine the world to be, with the birds and the beasts personages come alive from the fairy-tales his grandmother told him about kings and princes, and common folk. That was why, he thought, the cliffs looked so forbidding and the mountains reared up like the turbulent waves of Lake Van.

"Look," he would cry, "there's a boy on a lion!"

"Where?" the other children would ask, crowding round him.

Zvart would point to a heap of stones in the field and run off laughing.

The children would chase after him to punish him for having fooled them. They would catch up with him on a hillock as he bent to smell a flower. But before they could pounce on him, he would pick the flower and say, laughingly, "See, the abbot's on his way to church."

And he would put on such a lively show, waving the flower about as he acted out the scene that the children would forget the affront and shriek with laughter.

"Isn't he something!" they would marvel.

They often gathered on the cliff, sitting in a circle around Zvart.

"I was walking along the bottom of the gorge," he'd begin, "when suddenly a mermaid swam to the surface of the river and called: 'Come here, Zvart. Come to me.' I walked over to her. Then she carried me off to the bottom of the river. There are so many palaces there, all made of precious stones and pearls."

"You're lying!" one of the boys would say and punch

him. Sensing danger, Zvart would run off, with the children shouting after him.

At home he would try to convince his parents and neighbours that he had seen a train of golden camels passing through the gorge. One had a monkey sitting on its back that was carrying an emerald rooster, while the camel driven was dressed in a cloth-of-gold cassock. There was a moon-faced flower girl with a wreath of rosebuds in her hair riding the camel.

As they listened to his stories his elders would exchange glances and shake their heads.

"God will not forsake you, child," one of them would say with a sigh.

Night cast its violets upon the village, the orchards and the cliffs.

Zvart was sound asleep when Sandukht, the old neighbour woman, said to his mother sadly, "There's something wrong with your son, my dear."

Gadisho, another old neighbour, a stern and god-fearing man, said prophetically: "Send him off to the Holy Cross Monastery."

Zvart's mother grieved, his father's face turned dark.

And so, on that calm evening, a thousand years before our time, when the cricket chirped cozily in a crack in the wall, Zvart's parents decided to send him away to the Holy Cross Monastery.

As he sat in the cart Zvart looked at the peasants dressed in their Sunday best, and it seemed to him that one of them was a tiger dressed as a man. Zvart laughed loudly and said, "A tiger's going to church." The peasant shook his head and looked at Zvart's father reproachfully. Zvart's mother wiped away a furtive fear.

Zvart moved up to the front of the cart, closer to his uncle Manuk, who put his arm around the boy's shoulders and handed him the switch. Zvart drove the oxen. Suddenly he pointed to one of the pair and said, "Look, Uncle! There's night in the ox's eyes."

Uncle Manuk laughed.

When the cart entered a small gorge Uncle Manuk began to sing.

*A star fell in love with a fish in the sea.
Their happiness, sadly, was never to be:
The fish could not fly to the star in the sky.
The star, if it fell in the water, would die.*

Zvart listened, his eyes glittering with curiosity.

"Did the star love the fish very much?"

"Ye-es," Uncle Manuk said with a sigh.

"But couldn't the star come down to the fish?"

"No, my pet."

"Is the sky very far?"

"Ah, yes."

Zvart began to wonder why the fish couldn't reach the sky, when his attention wandered to the gurgling stream which made its way through the gorge, its ripples forming endless patterns. Clear springs trickled down the face of the rock on both sides.

The gorge widened between two mountain ranges. A black monastery crowned the mountain peninsula, looking down on the world sternly and majestically, its cupolas framed against the sky.

A group of pilgrims crowded round the entrance. Zvart gazed at the monastery wall. Then he pointed, saying, "Look, Father. Who's that standing there, holding a pomegranate?"

"Where?"

"Over there."

His father and the pilgrims peered at the cracked wall. In Zvart's imagination the pattern of the cracks were human forms. He laughed merrily. "See? There's an archer."

The people became frightened. Others joined them, and all looked at Zvart with pity. He was waving his hands about, explaining, "See? He's offering the deer his pomegranate."

The pilgrims crossed themselves fearfully. Zvart's mother wept softly, while his father took his hand to calm him. The abbot smiled at them.

One of the peasants whispered to the abbot, "He's always seeing things, Father. It's as if he's dreaming out loud."

"We must pray for the Lord's mercy," the abbot mumbled.

Everyone felt sorry for the boy. Zvart was to remain in the monastery. He was being sacrificed to God. Never would he see his home again.

The service began. The tinkling of bells could be heard from the chapel, like the bells round the camels' necks.

The men in the crowd, accompanied by children, entered the church.

The dark, dusty vaulted ceiling resembled the outspread wings of black eagles. The corners were hidden in darkness. The small flame of an icon-lamp flickered in the depths of the altar like a star in a fog. Monks in black cassocks mumbled the words of the prayers in guttural voices. The dark corners of the church were as forlorn as the closed eyes of the dead.

Zvart was depressed. He stood looking at the floor, unable to raise his eyes.

The service ended. Zvart was led up to the altar. Before him in a frame he saw the terrible face of a dead man. The man had a scraggy beard and bony fingers. His cheek and one eye had been scorched by a candle. He was staring at Zvart menacingly.

"Kiss Him. Kiss Him," someone whispered.

There was the sound of swishing, tumbling waves. Zvart heard a tearful voice saying, "Oh, my darling son, my poor Zvart."

Zvart opened his eyes. Where was he? What had happened? His parents were sitting beside him. His mother struck her knees as she wept. The pilgrims crowded round them. An old man with a white beard sat at Zvart's feet, looking at him calmly, reminding the boy of the white-robed old man floating on a cloud in the blue sky he had seen on the ceiling of the church.

Towards evening Zvart's parents and the pilgrims left the monastery. Now Zvart was alone in the gloomy churchyard beneath the cold light of the stars. Not a single sound broke the stillness in the yard, as silent as a tombstone under which a live butterfly, little Zvart, had been buried.

His parents and fellow-villagers left on their long journey home, disappearing into the turquoise mist that filled the valley. He looked sadly in that direction and sighed. A novice took him to the abbot's cell and told him he was to sleep on the sheepskin on the floor. The abbot sat by an icon-lamp, reading aloud softly from a book in a black leather binding. Zvart stared at him unblinkingly from where he

lay on the sheepskin. The abbot turned a page, and Zvart glimpsed a golden sunburst and garlands of flowers.

The sight of the flowers wrenched his heart. He recalled the flowers of his native fields and gorges, and his eyes filled with tears. Why had they brought him here, to this strange and gloomy monastery? When would they come back to take him home? Could it be that he would never see his father, his mother or his friends again? Had they all deserted him? Zvart sobbed loudly.

That night he had chills and a fever. There was a ringing in his ears, while wave upon wave of flowers passed before his eyes. His parched lips drank water greedily, yet he could not quench his thirst. The more he drank, the thirstier he became. Zvart was unconscious for several days. The abbot cared for him with patience and compassion.

Finally, consciousness returned. Zvart opened his eyes and wiped the cold sweat from his brow with a shaky hand. The novice brought him some gruel and cold spring water.

Zvart recovered, but a deep sorrow was sapping his strength.

The spring blossoming of the earth filled the monastery yard, calling him home to his native valley, to his friends. A dark-blue range of mountains stretched towards his distant native land. That was where the swallows headed. Swan-clouds with white maidens astride them sailed in that direction, too.

Zvart would sit by the monastery wall at the edge of the precipice for hours on end, gazing longingly into the distance.

Soft twilight would descend, putting him to sleep. The novice Gunkianos would find him asleep at the edge of the precipice. He would awaken the boy and lead him back to his cell.

In winter, when snowflakes circled over the chasm like doves, Zvart would watch their playing and would, in his mind's eye, circle with them. Then he would return to his cell, curl up on his sheepskin and fall asleep.

Gunkianos was a kind-hearted youth. He was terribly sorry for Zvart and soon became very attached to him.

As Zvart's heart turned to ice under the stares of the monks, he looked to Gunkianos for sympathy. The novice was the only person who encouraged and consoled him.

In the evenings, as Zvart lay on the sheepskin, he would watch the abbot, who spent his nights pouring over the parchment sheets, writing for hours on end. What was he writing? What were the old man's thoughts?

The abbot was indeed a strange person. His silence and dedication aroused Zvart's curiosity. What was he really like? Whatever Zvart knew of him he had learned from Gunkianos. Before renouncing the world the abbot had been an architect and philosopher. He had built monasteries, schools and fortresses. Then, when his body had become feeble, he had taken a monk's orders to devote his time to philosophy. The brothers did not like him, they reproached him for being constantly occupied with worldly affairs instead of thinking about the salvation of his soul.

Gunkianos's stories fanned Zvart's curiosity. During their study hours, when the two of them would sit cross-legged before the abbot, Zvart would stare wide-eyed at the wise old man, fearful of missing a word. At first he had difficulty in understanding his unusual, unfamiliar speech. One thing was clear, though: the abbot was an extraordinary man, one whose thoughts were as deep and fathomless as the sea and as incomprehensible as its rumblings. Zvart listened to the old man, entranced.

Beyond the walls of the cell, in the vast world of nature, a majestic celebration was under way. The heavenly luminary poured forth its light upon the mountains and valleys, while birds soared in the sky. The Earth was celebrating its greatest feast: the joy of creation.

Zvart and Gunkianos pored over their lesson. The old abbot was lost in his writings. A bee buzzed through the open door of the cell, bathing in a ray of sunshine, carrying the joy of life to them.

Suddenly the ray was blotted out. Zvart looked up to see a tall man standing on the threshold. He lowered his head to avoid the lintel, took a step into the cell and stopped. His goatee stuck straight out as he cast a sharp glance at Zvart. He then bent close to the abbot and handed him a book.

Gunkianos and Zvart stretched their necks to see what it was. The abbot opened it. The pages were adorned with vignettes and head-pieces. There were pictures of monasteries and other buildings in the text. The tall man

had something to do with the book, for he began turning the pages, explaining things here and there. Zvart guessed that he had done the drawings.

"The abbot wrote the book and did the drawings of the buildings, and then Tade copied it and drew the pictures," Gunkianos whispered in his ear.

The abbot closed the book, sighed contentedly and then said in a thoughtful voice, "I have done my duty. I have completed my life's work. Now I can face the Almighty with a clear conscience."

The artist Tade kissed the old man's hand and left.

The abbot smiled at Zvart and Gunkianos gently. He began reading aloud to them from his book. So carried away was he that he seemed to have forgotten all about his audience.

"The Universe and creative work. . . ."

He turned a page and continued with fervour, "The construction of cities, the construction of speech, the construction of thought...." Pointing now towards the sky, now towards the ground and now at the monastery walls, he spoke to them of the power of the human mind and explained the laws of architecture to them.

Zvart's imagination was fired, creating wondrous pictures in his mind. Spades rang, masons with stern faces hacked away at the cliffs, while expert bricklayers built magnificent cities whose towers pierced the sky and whose gardens hung above the chasms.

"Nature labours endlessly, growing trees, multiplying anthills. Children of the Earth, you too must be creators and love your labours. Creativeness and labour are sacred...."

"Oppression will vanish, thrones and kingdoms will crumble, nothing but labour's fruit will remain.. ."

The face of this unusual man was changing. This was no longer a stern monk but an earthly man who dreamed of magnificent structures. The walls of the cell seemed to expand, giving Zvart a glimpse of the boundless world beyond. And this world in which birds built their warm nests and ants worked tirelessly appeared to him as a gigantic architectural structure, with towers reaching into the sky, with a blazing sun above, with columns of cliffs and deep chasms.

Zvart was restless. He could not sleep at night. His soul was tortured by a strange thirst. He did not know what troubled him, nor what he wanted.

Gunkianos, seeing Zvart thus and not knowing how to help him, said, "Try to read more, Zvart."

Zvart looked at his friend sadly. "My mind is too feeble to even understand myself, Gunkianos."

"Have patience. The Lord will bless you with His grace and your mind will clear."

"What is His grace?"

"That means the Lord will reveal your wishes to you and will make you wiser."

"Who is the Lord?"

Gunkianos could not make himself clear, for his own understanding of the subject was muddled. The abbot had told him that God's grace was light.

"Light?" This frightened Zvart. But what if He appeared at night, in the darkness, during the lonely hours? Zvart felt uneasy as he pondered over this.

He wandered outside the monastery walls, lost in thought. The cliffs, the springs, the flowers were all bathed in the light of the spring sun. It seemed to Zvart that they were inhabited by rational, living creatures. He felt he could speak with them in a secret tongue. He saw them everywhere: in the clouds, on the monastery walls, in the darkness. They moved and took on human shape, they spoke to him, they laughed and called to him to follow.

Zvart tried to trace their outline in the air in order to remember them, but they disappeared, leaving behind only words, fiery words that rang in his ears. They would ring for a while and fade away. Then it would all start over again.

Zvart was restless, striving for something, yearning for he knew not what.

He stood alone in the high vaulted structure, listening to the silence. Night peered in through the narrow windows with all-seeing eyes. It was gloomy and sad inside. The murmur of the sleepless stream rose from the bottom of the chasm, and a night bird cried out soulfully in the valley.

Suddenly the long walls parted and Someone entered. It was he, Zvart. But Zvart was not too surprised. He had

often seen his own reflection in streams and dewdrops. The shining eyes of his double glittered like diamonds. Zvart was frightened by this brilliance.

He could not bring himself to look into his eyes, but some unknown force urged him to. He finally raised his eyes and, struck by pure terror, he crumpled to the floor.

He lay there motionlessly for a long time, and could not recall what followed. He felt his double approaching him, then bending over him. Zvart heard his voice. It was as soft as a whisper and as melodious as a song. The song lulled Zvart to sleep like a mournful melody, and words rose up in his soul to fit the music.

It was the dead of night when he finally opened his eyes. He could see the sky through the half-open cell door. A solitary star shimmered in its depths like a drop of molten gold. Zvart could still hear the wondrous melody. He lapsed into his sweet dream again.

When he awakened a second time the swallow was chirping its morning song on the cornice outside. It reminded him of the sweet whisperings of the night.

Leaving through the gates, Zvart set off to wander about outside the monastery. The rays of the morning sun softened the oppressive colonnade of the cliffs. The stream gurgled at the bottom of the gorge, rushing off into the unknown, and in its murmurings he heard the same sweet melody of the night.

He stopped short. Who had that visitor been? It couldn't have been himself. Who was he? He realised he was humming the melody he had heard at night and knew now he had sung it in his sleep, and that Someone had been himself (for there could really be no doubles).

Then he felt the words forming in his mouth. He was gripped by a desire to say them aloud, to sing them solemnly for all to hear.

He began to recite softly.

Several monks were standing by the wall, warming themselves in the morning sun. They caught sight of Zvart waving his arms about at the very edge of the cliff.

"He's touched in the head! He'll fall!" one of them exclaimed. Running over to the boy, he grabbed him by the hand. Zvart looked at him from feverish eyes. His lips were trembling.

The monks took him to the abbot who had come out into the yard.

“What’s the matter, child? Are you ill?”

He placed his hand on Zvart’s forehead. It was burning.

Zvart was breathing rapidly, gazing at the abbot from clouded eyes. The old man patted his head and spoke kindly.

“Tell me what’s wrong. What’s bothering you, my son?”

“Tell him!” the monks cried.

Zvart looked at them, then at the abbot and started. He felt that he must confess to what had filled his soul to overflowing. His face cleared as he began to tell them of his dream and of the special gift that had come to him. His words flowed, he noticed nothing of his surroundings.

Spring arrives, awakening the earth, watering the green shoots. The snowdrops open their petals, calling out to all the other flowers: awaken, awaken! You’ve had enough sleep, bring joy to the world.

*The hills and valleys are so green again,
The world is like a happy child at play.
For with a grace divine it has been blessed.
The peach trees blossom out in pink array.
With blue its lovely eyes the primrose shades.
All Nature is in love, and all is love.
It’s in the dewdrops on the blushing rose.
And in the radiance of the sun above.
In songs of birds, in everything that grows.
The world seems better, kinder when there’s love.*

The monks listened to Zvart with stony faces. His words found no response in their hearts.

The most malicious of them all, Brother Azar, said savagely, “Listen to the good-for-nothing talk! You’d think he was as wise as the abbot.”

The abbot cut him short. “Why do you belittle him? Zvart’s thoughts are clear and deep. This youth is wiser than an abbot.”

The monks were sullen. They looked at Zvart hatefully. Zvart saw the envious Azar’s face become ugly with hate.

The abbot blessed Zvart and told the monks to go back to their cells. They left, burning with anger. From that day on they no longer tried to hide it. They never missed a chance to shower Zvart with reproaches and curses. How-

ever, he seemed not to notice their antagonism. A smile never left his face.

"He's mocking us," the monks seethed, indignant because the abbot had taken a possessed boy under his wing.

They began to slander the abbot, spreading rumours that he was an heretic and a sorcerer. He was writing a satanic book that should be burned.

When these rumours finally reached the abbot they made him very sad. Sensing that his end was near, he worried about the fate of his life's work, the creation of his very soul. Gunkianos was too simple-minded, Zvart was too young. To whom could he entrust his book? There was nothing but desert and darkness on all sides.

One day the monks, headed by Azar, came to the abbot to demand that Zvart be banished from the monastery as one possessed, for the spirit of the devil that was in him defiled the sacred church.

The abbot came out into the yard to speak to them. He tried to reason with them, saying, "Where is your mercy?" His voice was full of reproach and grief. "You do not value his gift, you misinterpret his thoughts."

"Tell him to come here. We'll listen to him and prove he's an heretic."

The abbot summoned Zvart from his cell. "Go, son, and prove your righteousness."

Zvart smiled as he came out and looked at the monks.

"Share your thoughts with them, let them judge you."

Zvart was silent for a moment. Then he began to speak.

His face changed, he became inspired. This is what he said:

***The spring has come. The whole world glows.
The violet, jealous of the rose.
Incites her flower friends to slay
Her rival, and they join the fray
If not to kill, then to demean
This much admired beauty queen.
She's sung in poetry and prose,
While none a glance on them bestows!
The plot is laid, to rally all
The flowers spread the vengeful call.
Be justice done, let slander glory,
From hyacinth to morning glory.***

*From tulip to the daffodil
The word is carried: kill her, kill!
When suddenly the nightingale
Began to sing. The flowers quailed
Before the beauty of the rose
As she awakened from her doze.
And blushing sweetly, raised her face
With infinite and modest grace.
Some jaundiced, others turning red,
The flowers in confusion fled.
Appalled that they might have destroyed
Such beauty, pure and unalloyed!*

The rose put on its festive robes, the nightingale perched on a branch nearby and, dizzy from the heady fragrance, it began to sing:

*Love is the light of day, the dark of night,
A tender blade of grass, yet proud and strong.
It is the rose upon whose thorny stem alights
Her lover nightingale to sing his song.
Would he have sung to you and braved your pales
If it were not his love that made him bold?
Don't send away your faithful nightingale
Into the angry wind and cold. .*

The rose stretched towards the nightingale, begging it for a kiss, saying that it would wilt from grief otherwise.

*Oh, kiss me, nightingale, and love me!
They will behead me, they will drain my blood
And make of it a balsam for the ailing.
My heart is shrinking, failing, failing. . .*

The jealous Azar stepped forward. Venom poured from his lips. "The rose's speeches and its love are satan's words."

"Ungodly words," the monks muttered.

"Do not slander him! His thoughts are pure."

But Azar would not give in. He stepped forward again and continued, "He's possessed, and we must drive the devil out of him!" At this he rushed at Zvart.

“Desist!” the abbot cried angrily. “What right have you to raise a hand against an innocent?”

The abbot was truly concerned. A rebellion was in the offing. How could he save the boy from the enraged fanatics? What was he to do? He looked at Zvart hopefully. “Can you explain your thoughts?” he said sternly.

Zvart understood the old man’s anxiety. Inspiration came to him in a flash. He turned to the monks and spoke with confidence:

*The parable shall I explain?
Who be the violet, who the rose?
And who the fearless nightingale?
For whom he sings, whereof his song?*

“The flowers are the high priests, the rose is Jesus, the violet is Judas, who betrayed him, and the nightingale is Gabriel, the divine messenger. The rose dressed in purple is Christ risen; the yellowed, wilted flowers are the warriors who leave his grave.”

The abbot was pleased with his reply. The monks were speechless.

Zvart had triumphed.

Azar alone caught the mischievous smile in Zvart’s eyes and realised his trick. He felt that Zvart’s thoughts were heretical, but his dull mind could not find a worthy reply to the boy’s explanation. He had no choice but to retreat. The other monks followed.

In the days that followed the monks’ cells resounded with curses flung at the abbot. The old man was depressed, he felt that the monks’ hostility would hasten his death.

One night he sat up into the small hours, writing his last testament. He was disturbed by the slander and jealousy of the monks, and in his testament the abbot castigated obscurantism and extolled the light of reason thus:

“My body shall turn to dust and shall be dispersed like smoke, but my truthful thoughts will outlive me. You may snatch my body and scatter my ashes, but my thoughts will shine like a ray of sunshine. Do not touch me, ye sons of darkness, for I represent truth, and my vengeance shall overwhelm you.”

He awakened Zvart and Gunkianos at dawn, drew them close, kissed them and said it was time for him to leave.

“Where to?” Gunkianos asked, though he immediately realised the meaning of the abbot’s words and began to weep.

The old man gave the youths his cherished book and told them to keep it safely hidden.

He died that very day.

The monks buried him with pomp, concealing their true hatred for him.

Gunkianos smuggled the book to Tade, who concealed it in a safe place.

The next day the monks shut Zvart up in a dark cell and forbade him to sing his song about the flowers. Gunkianos alone came to see him. Zvart would look at him sorrowfully and then would begin to talk, giving vent to his imagination. Carried away by the power of poetry, they would forget they were in a dungeon. Gunkianos never tired of hearing Zvart’s poem about the flowers.

However, the day dawned when the monks put an end to these visits. Now Gunkianos could only see Zvart through the slit of a window in the cell. As before, Zvart smiled at him dreamily and seemed carefree.

Thus did Zvart die with a smile on his lips.

Life in all its splendour shone beneath the vaulted ceiling of the dark cell, for the artist Tade had spread his paints on the floor. Sheets of parchment tacked to wooden frame were suspended from the ceiling on narrow thongs. Tade dipped his pen into a bowl of paint. Then, his eagle-eye fixed on the parchment, he stood motionlessly for a few moments and finally began to draw. The colours burned on the parchment.

His pupils watched their tutor with bated breath. They both feared and loved him. Tade could work miracles with his pen. The more he frowned, the merrier the colours on the parchment became, golden, turquoise, orange and amber.

His pupils asked him what book he was working on.

Tade raised his head. His gaze was vacant. Coming to with a start, he noticed Gunkianos.

Tade resumed his work, his attention fixed on the peacock with a proud and arching neck of beige. The plumage of its tail was as beautiful as an oriental carpet. The strange flowers on the margins sparkled like precious stones. Above was a sky of such pure blue it would seem the parchment

had torn and a bit of sky was looking down through the opening.

The pupils worked diligently and in silence on the vignettes surrounding the master's drawings.

From time to time Tade would say, "Orange is the colour of molten gold. There's a golden radiance around this. ... The heavens are as the sky.. .. Bright blue.... The cypress is a moist green. And here, in the head-piece, there must be a rose."

At night Gunkianos came to Tade's cell and told him about Zvart. Tade listened absently, lost in his own dreams. The darkness was a hindrance to his work. He was tormented by insomnia. The colours that burned brightly on the dark sheet of parchment had snatched away his sleep. Nature had taken his brush and was painting star-petals on the dark sheet of the sky. Tade listened.

Gunkianos became bolder and finally recited Zvart's song about the flowers. Poor Gunkianos, this was his one bright memory!

Tade was touched by Zvart's gentle song. Having heard it to the end he murmured, " 'Tis beatific and sweet to the heart."

"Will you do the drawings for Zvart's song, Tade?" Gunkianos pleaded tearfully.

The artist agreed. "Indeed, I'll begin tomorrow."

Tade worked selflessly, bringing Zvart's song to life in the abbot's book. Gunkianos watched Tade's every motion. The artist mixed the paints, searching for ever new hues. Bright ornaments appeared on the margins. There were blood-red tigers stalking orange deer. Tade worked feverishly. He was wasting away like a burning candle. He searched for a shade and could not find it. His tired eyes squinted, as if peering into a chasm where a flower of unseen hue blossomed. But the moment he dipped his pen in the paint-pot and touched it to the parchment the shade he had searched for and found evaded him like a magic bird. Tade sighed and gazed at the parchment helplessly.

His pupils dared not breathe. They shared their tutor's throes of creation.

Suddenly Tade sighed with exasperation and strode out of the cell.

“He’s gone to search for the right shade. Let’s follow him.”

They followed Tade through the monastery gates and into the mountains. He roamed the slopes all day, accompanied by his pupils. Then, returning to his cell, he picked up his pen once again. New colours blossomed forth in the reverential stillness.

It was a flaming book, full of light and wisdom.

Fiery half-beasts, half-birds, fishes and flowers adorned the two manuscripts; one dealt with the Universe and the sacredness of creative labour, while the other flowed as a fiery stream from one page to the next. This was Zvart’s Song of the Flowers.

Snow brightened the mountains, but the monastery was sombre and the dungeon in which the abbot’s book and other manuscripts were interred was dark and dank. Dampness ate away at the book. They say that moisture ruins parchment. There were flowers in this book. Had they fallen asleep or perished from the damp, as had the book?

The monks gave in to gluttony. They became as fat as toads, having forgotten about the abbot, Zvart, Tade and his pupils. Then one fine day the monks were banished from the monastery and went on their different ways.

Night had fallen. Winter had set in over the mountains of Armenia. It was piercingly cold. The sky was as a frozen pane of glass. Gunkianos made his way down the slope. There was a bundle over his shoulder, and he carried a book wrapped in a silk kerchief. His fingers were numb with cold, but he would not have let go of the book even if his hand had withered.

Gunkianos had run away from the monastery. His one aim was to save the book at any cost. If only he succeeded.... He did not know where he was going. A terrible storm raged over the mountains. The valleys swarmed with soldiers. Cities, villages, monasteries and libraries were all put to the torch.

By morning the storm had thrown a white blanket over the mountains and gorges. An old monk coming out of an ancient monastery discovered a half-frozen man with a sack

over his shoulder by the gates. Beside him was an open book, the blue sky smiling up from its pages.

The old monk picked it up reverently.

The book's later fate is obscure, for it left but a faint trace in the history of that century.

The hooves of Sultan Elterym's cavalry resounded on the roads of Armenia. His troops were advancing like a storm cloud. The thunder of hoofbeats broke the silence of the earth.

An old man was poring over ancient monastery manuscripts in his cell. He was indifferent to the disaster that had befallen his land. Two warriors entered his cell. He did not even notice them. They spoke to him. He did not hear their voices. The enraged men shot their arrows into him, killing the old monk.

Soon the cell was filled with the acrid smoke of burning books. The soldiers were delighted by the sight of the flaming parchments. Finally, bored with this sport, they reminded themselves of the old monk. An inkling of fear crept into their hearts. Perhaps there had been no need to kill him.

"What sort of books are these?"

"Who knows?"

"They say a book can become angry and take revenge. They say truth lives in a book."

Suddenly the crackling flames cast out a volume. The men rushed to put out the flames, leaving the cell when the fire had gone out.

The book had become angry.

"No, books should not be burned."

The willows whispered in the gorge. Autumn slipped down the slopes like a cold spring, filling the gorge. The rustle of the willows blended with the gurgle of the mossy stream. The miller Akop opened the millpond dam, and the mill stopped turning.

Hunger had come to the land.

Akop stood beneath the willows, speaking to his young son Usik. "Go to Damascus. The mills have stopped. Bring back wheat that we may plant it and be saved."

There was a sad smile in Usik's blue eyes. "How can we be saved?" he asked, looking at his father in wonder.

“Don’t act the fool! Open your eyes. Can’t you see the country’s perishing?”

Akop went into the house and took a coloured robe and five silk kerchiefs from the chest. His work-worn fingers counted out thirty coins from his purse.

“This is the money I got for selling ten spades. Sell the robe and kerchiefs. That will be enough to take you there. You can find work on the way. Next spring you’ll come back with the grain, and we’ll have something to sow.”

Usik gazed at his father thoughtfully. He thought his father was as wise as Nature itself. His words brought fear to Usik’s heart.

And so, Usik set out for Damascus, a sad smile in his blue eyes. Behind him in the mist lay his native land.

Sun-scorched roads crossed the land. Camel caravans traversed the roads, carrying fragrant bales of dates, pistachio nuts, coffee and wheat.

Usik’s thoughts were not happy. “What did Father say? We’d save our lives? But how? What can save a person? The earth? But they’ll take it away from us. The Seljuk and the Tatar armies are massed against Armenia. They’re advancing like an avalanche, spilling rivers of blood. Then riches, perhaps? But I have seen rich men turn into beggars as their gold slipped through their fingers. What can save our lives? And what actually is the meaning of life?”

All of Usik’s thoughts were concerned with the meaning of life.

He continued on his way, drenched in sweat, pierced by the scorching rays of the sun. They stung him like the spikes of the blackthorn.

Oh, if only one could become a bird and fly away into the sky with all one’s earthly possessions! But what would be the use? He would be torn to bits by the vultures and the eagles. They would snatch away all he had.

The city shimmered in the sun, draped in a mantle of golden dust. The streets teemed. Usik’s eyes grew wide with wonder. Here was a bronzed youth bending a sharp sword with his strong hands. The steel vibrated as it bent and then straightened out again. The bronzed youth was surrounded by a crowd of other youths. They laughed, their white teeth flashing. Camels rested beneath the plane trees. Bales of wheat and other goods were stacked in piles around them.

Usik sank down by the bales, leaning against a tree. The sun was blazing, the air was stifling. He gazed at the buildings that circled the bazaar, at the scurrying people with sunburned faces. He was dying of thirst, dreaming of cool blue water. He could actually feel it on his parched lips. He was falling asleep. His thoughts became jumbled. Usik did not know how long he sat there, nor whether he had dozed or not. Suddenly his eyes came to rest on a group of men. They were laughing and snatching a book from each other's hands.

Usik jumped to his feet. It was as if he had seen something familiar. What was it? Oh, yes, it was a book. He had once seen books like this. He approached the men. One, who had got possession of it, was scratching at the silver on the back. Another took it from him, peered at the silver-embossed black leather binding, then opened it and began leafing through it. Each page was ablaze with the colours of spring and bountiful autumn. There were red skies, flaming roses and other wondrous flowers, all bright, captivating and triumphant. The colours of his native valleys and mountains came to life before Usik's eyes.

What was written in this book that blinded one with its colours?

The book was for sale. Its owner was a good-natured Arab who explained to one and all that he had come upon it during his last campaign and that he had been stupid enough to drag it all the way back to Damascus.

"How much do you want for it?" someone asked in a bantering voice.

"Thirty coins!"

The prospective buyer burst out laughing. He flung the book to the ground. The others began to kick it around. The soldier bent over lazily and picked it up with a smile. He was amused because no one in the crowd seemed to want it.

Usik walked up to him, took the book and began turning the pages slowly. He was entranced by the flowers. They bloomed with all the fragrance of spring, of life eternal. The book was as calm and unhurried as a man who has learned the laws of life, who has discovered its mysteries and is not afraid of death, who loves life and knows how to resist fate.

Usik spelled out the words: "This work is sacred."

His great-great-grandfather Sargis suddenly came to mind. They said he had been a mason and a great one for drinking and merrymaking. He had sung as he built great stone walls, he had sung in time of misfortune, too. It had seemed that old age would never claim him. Returning home one day, he saw that his house had been pillaged. His family was now penniless. But Grandfather Sargis had laughed and said, "Ah, but I still have my hands."

In those difficult times he would say, "Work is a pledge of life." His son, a skilled architect, had said the same, as had his grandson and, finally, his great-grandson, Usik's father. His father had told Usik that in their family the motto that had been handed down from father to son was: work is the most important thing in the world.

"Work is sacred" were the words he had read in the book. That is what Usik's hard-working ancestors had said. He read the words again: "This work is sacred."

Was this the same book then?

Usik's eyes burned. He handed the soldier the coins. The man took them, thrust the book into his hands quickly and walked off, chuckling. There were laughter and surprised exclamations in the crowd.

But Usik noticed naught. He was completely absorbed by his thoughts.

The crowd around him was growing. As he was putting the book into his sack someone called him by name. It was Sogomon, a fellow-villager.

"Are you mad? Or stupid? Why, you've given him all your money for a book."

"I know," Usik said, smiling with embarrassment.

"What are you going to sow this spring?"

Usik was crushed by the question. A shadow crossed his face.

"You think I've been very foolish, don't you?"

"Go on home, you fool."

Yes, he would go back home, where hunger awaited him.

The ashes of time converge over the book. Once again its trail is lost.

What happened to Usik? Did he starve to death, or did he survive? Indeed, it was an act of madness.

The chronicles say that Usik paid good money for the book.

He must have felt that salvation lay not in wheat, for not even wheat could stave off death forever.

A book protruded from under the pillow of an ailing child (for centuries had passed). No one in this family of ignorant tillers knew what the book was about. They had come upon it in the ruins of a house. It was said that the book would heal all sickness. And their child was feeble-minded.

“Where is this caravan heading, Hadji?”

“To Venice, and then on to Geneva if luck is with us.”

The hadji was bent over a book, reading avidly. His way lay across the burning desert. The camels carried madder, skins and precious stones.

The caravan made camp. The hadji read on, dispelling the ennui of the journey.

Thus had the book come down to us through the ages. Wandering through the blackness of the centuries like a flickering light, it had reached us in the end. We shall never know what dangers it overcame in its journeys. Neither cold nor darkness, nor fire, nor heat were able to destroy it. Was it by some miracle or by chance that it survived? Our forefathers had looked after it, preserving it and handing it down to successive generations despite all the adversities of time.

The book smiles. It is simple, carefree, mischievous and knows its purpose. Or perhaps it is wise and knows its future?

It is as a ray of sunshine playing on the heaving waves of a stormy sea. The waves turn yellow, they become dark, they foam and thunder, challenging the sun itself, yet through it all the sun's ray smiles down, knowing no fear. The sea's hatred does not bother it, the waves do not frighten it.

Thousands of eyes have enjoyed the play of colour, thousands of hands have touched these pages, reverently and gently, putting the book aside with love and regret.

Thousands of hands have turned to dust, thousands of searching eyes have closed in death, yet the life-giving book has lived on.

A red storm leafs through the golden pages of the book, which, having survived the centuries, looks upon it with trust. It has survived together with its eternal keeper: the people.

The centuries lie silent in the steel-clad archives. A grey head is bent over the chasm of ancient history and sees in its depth flowers, flowers and still more flowers. ...

SAADI'S LAST SPRING

Spring had come.

It was one of those springs that transform the earth. Saadi, poet of joy and sadness, had seen one hundred such springs.

Saadi awoke early that morning. He went out into the flowering orchard on the bank of the Ronnabad River to hear the nightingale sing once again and to witness again the miracle of spring.

He gazed at the field of Shiraz, adorned by nature's gift of roses and deep in its morning slumber. It was veiled by a fragrant white fog.

Saadi sat down on a beautiful rug beneath a flowering jasmine. He held a green-red rosebud in his trembling hands a while and whispered softly: "As a young maiden smiles upon the lover who embraces her, so does the rose part its lips for the morning breeze."

Though Saadi was now very old, his soul still saw and heard, through half-closed lids and ears, the wondrous events and images of this world, the songs and silences of the unknown distances: for the magic spirit of poetry, the Zmrुकht bird that made its nest on top of Mount Kaf in the Kingdom of Stars, still spoke to him.

Light-eyed, grey-feathered nightingales trilled, singing their enchanting rubaiyat, burning with the fire of love, and their songs echoed in Saadi's heart.

The virgin breath of a caressing breeze brought the roses greetings from far-off enamoured roses, and Saadi's soul understood these declarations of love.

"A loving heart will always understand the words of

Nature. The world is full of harmony. Its enamoured intoxication is immortal," he recalled the words he had uttered long ago.

Carried away by the nightingale's song and the beauty of the red roses, Saadi breathed in their entrancing fragrance and, intoxicated by it, he closed his eyes; as in a dream he saw the world reflected in his own heart.

He saw the still rivers of India, adorned by sacred lotuses.

He saw the wise elephants, pensive in the jungle thickets. And in the golden palaces of Delhi he saw the lovely maidens with crimson flowers in their blue-black hair.

He saw the stormy plains of Turan and the terrible villains with flaming swords, carried aloft on the wings of the storm.

He saw the desert as well, scorched by the sun, with mounted Bedouins chasing fleet-footed gazelles under the keen eyes of soaring eagles.

He also saw the endless caravans of pilgrims; he saw them kneeling, praying and singing before the gates of Mecca.

He saw the famous wonders of ancient Egypt, the blue crystals of vast seas and the velvet-skinned maidens of Damascus with their shimmering bodies; their supple, caressing arms had embraced young Saadi like a necklace.

Saadi sighed and opened his eyes.

"Alas, my hundred years have flown by like a sweet dream, like one night's vision; the years have flown by like a moment, for you have always been my companions, you fairy-tales, nightingales and roses, and you sisters of the roses, maidens full of bliss!"

The sun broke forth from the heavenly gardens that sparkled with flowers, and the grasses, leaves, stones and cliffs glittered, for the night had strewn diamond dust over them all.

Saadi's gaze was deep as he looked at the blue heavens and the birds soaring in the gold of sunrise.

He looked upon them with wonder and awe.

"True, the world is a miracle, a fairy-tale; it is eternally wondrous and beautiful.

"Each day I look out upon the world and each day I am amazed anew, as if I were seeing it for the first time; the world is familiar, yet wonderful, old, yet ever new, new

with an eternal and inexpressible beauty equal only to itself."

Saadi again looked out upon the world, at the multiform and magical play of nature and noticed two doves, stepping with coral-red feet upon the green meadow as they billed and cooed; and again Saadi spoke aloud:

"The world is enchanted, everything in it is under the spell of a magic wand in the hand of an invisible sorceress, and all has turned into a fairy-tale.

"The world rushes on headlong, falling apart and ever changing; but what recreates and rebuilds this magnificent world again, spreading this wonderful fairy-tale before us?

"What makes the gazelle, its heart weary with love's passion, clamber up the sharp cliffs, breaking its horns on the rocks?

"What makes the rose burst its emerald sheath and emit such sweet fragrance?

"What makes a human being break forth from the unknown and acquire flesh and blood in order to think and suffer, to feel the flames of our scorching desires and never want to die?

"Ah, love, you unconquerable force, you sweet tyrant, long have I known you! And yet, never was I able to fully comprehend your depth and your essence."

Saadi's intuition told him that this was to be his last spring.

His last spring!

The garden gate opened.

Yielding her snow-white body to the caresses of the breeze, Naziat of Shiraz, Saadi's beloved who often came to him, entered.

Her lips, as heady as wine, the whiteness and heat of her naked arms had often delighted the sleepless nights of the centenarian poet.

Saadi loved her with all his youthful, unfading heart, having drawn her in letters of gold in his immortal *Gulistan*.

Naziat approached, her arms filled with roses, and greeted him, herself as fragrant as a rose.

The poet was sad. Sadness lay on his pale lips.

"What grieves you, oh most happy of mortals?"

Saadi was silent.

"I love your wistfulness, o Saadi; your sadness is wise; for have your heavenly lips not said that pearls are born of wounds and the fragrance of incense is sweet as it burns." Saadi gazed upon her with a faded smile.

"Look, I have brought you roses, velvet roses from my garden."

She showered Saadi with roses, and touched the poet's sad face with the tips of her bright fingers.

"The roses which you gave me, o heavenly maiden, were always the best roses in the world and never faded."

"Yes, Saadi. 'Why, as one breathes in the fragrance of a rose, must one think of its short life? Remember its fragrance and then you will soon forget that it has long since faded.' " Naziat repeated the poet's once-spoken words in her silvery voice.

And her hair that called up dreams fell on Saadi's face as she sank down beside him; then a fragrant breeze blew through the orchard, its rainbow wings fluttering; it was the wondrous wings of the Zmrukht bird fluttering in the air as Saadi stroked Naziat's dreamy hair with a faltering hand.

Then Saadi cast a glance from the bottom of his soul upon the fairy-tale world ablaze around him; he glanced at the bright smile of the lovely maiden, and a hot tear burned his old heart; then, taking the girl's small hand in his, he kissed it and pressed it against his fluttering heart.

"Write my last words on the last page of my *Gulistan* with your own small hand:

" 'We are not born of our own will, we live in wonder and die in anguish! ' "

Rafael Aramian

*SHE TOOK A PITCHER
AND WENT FOR WATER*

The horse smelled of the stable: it seemed that no one had ridden it in a long time. The traveller walked ahead, leading his horse. Soon a shepherd caught up with them. He was cradling a new-born lamb.

“Good day. Where are you going?” the traveller asked, stroking the lamb’s silky fleece.

“And a good day to you. I’m going to Sarigiukh.”

“Are you bringing spring to the snow-capped mountain?”

“What spring? I’m carrying a lamb.”

“A lamb is spring.”

The shepherd laughed to himself at this strange reply and looked at the traveller closely.

“What about you? What are you bringing the snow-capped mountain?” he asked jeeringly. The traveller noticed the undisguised mockery in his eyes but did not take offence.

“Nothing. On the contrary, I want to take some things back with me.”

“What?” There was concern in the shepherd’s voice. “Are you one of the landlords?”

“No.”

“Who are you then?”

“I collect songs.”

The shepherd thought that was a silly answer. Whoever heard of anyone collecting songs?

“Oh, but they do,” the traveller said, guessing the other man’s thoughts. “You have to search for a song. If you only knew how many songs there are hidden away in your knapsack.”

“I can see you like a joke. Why should they be in my

knapsack? All I have there is cheese, bread and mint that grows on the river bank."

The traveller smiled.

The shepherd lowered the lamb to the ground and began untying his knapsack. The lamb swayed on its buckling legs. Spring was so young and fresh! The soft, lacy grass swayed at the slightest breeze. The lamb spread its legs, lowered its tiny head and pulled up a mouthful of grass from under its hoof.

"Sit down. We go as far as Sarigiukh together," the shepherd said. "Cheese and mint will refresh us. Come." They reached Sarigiukh towards evening. They climbed on foot, while the lamb's tiny white head protruded from the knapsack tied to the saddle. Just outside the village their way was blocked by a flock of sheep. The lamb bleated pitifully. The flock moved on, but one light-fleeced ewe stopped, looked about in confusion and bleated, too.

"Only a mother who has lost her child will respond to the cry of an orphan."

"Yes," the shepherd agreed. "It has always been that way and always will be. So you're looking for songs?" he suddenly asked. This time there was neither surprise nor mockery in his voice. "Look over there." He pointed to a house of fieldstone by the bend in the road. "The people there have been waiting for their wanderer to return. They even built their house by the road so that a late traveller might find a lodging for the night. The old woman's son has gone to a foreign land and she said to her daughter-in-law: 'May the doors of our house always be open to travellers so that our wanderer, too, will always find a welcome'." The shepherd untied his knapsack from the saddle and slung it over his shoulder. Then he bid his companion farewell and headed up the road to Sarigiukh. For a long while after the traveller followed the white spot in the twilight that was the lamb's head and heard its pitiful, heart-rending bleating. And then once again in the darkness the ewe that had lost its lamb responded to the mournful cry.

The traveller stopped for the night at the fieldstone house by the edge of the village. His horse was stabled. The woman's daughters-in-law brought him water. After he had washed the mistress of the house said, "Where shall we make up your bed?"

"On the roof."

"If that's what he wants, that's what you do," she said to the young women.

"Never mind the bedding. Just bring me some hay. I like to sleep on hay."

The old woman looked up at him in surprise. She sounded offended as she replied, "Who ever heard of an Armenian family that offered a guest dirty linen?"

One after another she threw back the neatly stacked blankets. One was like an Eastern fairy-tale with its dazzling almond-shaped design. It seemed as if handfuls of almonds and persimmons had been scattered over a bright field. The traveller passed his hand over the blanket. In his childhood he had had one just as bright as this. He had never tired of gazing at its rainbow colours, hearing a song in the design, seeing slim-waisted youths and almond-eyed girls among the endless roads that wound in and out of its folds.

Later, outside the monastery walls of Echmiadzin, he had met people from his native village who had somehow managed to escape the Turkish massacre. Once again he had seen these blankets, now covering the unfortunate refugees. But the almond-shaped designs no longer seemed a part of a fairy-tale to him. Instead, they reminded him of the prints of the Janissarys' boots, those boots with the up-turned toes that were ready to trample his heart, the heart of his Motherland.

He ran his hand over the blanket again, as if to erase the accursed footprints.

"Don't you believe me?" The old woman sounded hurt.

"Of course I do. It's just that I'm not used to sleeping in a bed."

"As you wish. They'll bring you some hay."

The young women left the room. All was silence. A cricket chirped in the corner, a mouse flitted across the strip of moonlight pouring down from the round opening in the roof.

The old woman motioned to her guest, inviting him to be seated. She set bread and soup made of sour milk and cooked wheat before him.

"Where are you from? Who are you? Whose son are you?" she asked.

The traveller broke the bread slowly into the bowl.

"I'm Armenian," he said, stirring the soup.

"I can see that."

"I'm from Kutaii, the son of Gevork and Takui Sogomonyan. I'm an abbot. My name is Komitas."

He spoke in such a monotonous, indifferent voice as he kept stirring the soup that the old woman looked at him distrustfully.

"What sort of an abbot are you if you don't even wear a cassock?"

"I haven't come here to preach. I'm collecting songs."

"He's not telling the truth," the old woman thought.

"Songs aren't wheat to be gathered," she said, glancing sharply at him again.

He was not offended. He did not even try to convince her, but kept on eating methodically.

"If you're really an abbot, say a prayer for my son," she said unexpectedly.

Komitas raised his head. His spoon was poised over the bowl. The mother's old eyes had filled with tears which now ran down her cheeks.

"He's in a foreign land and there's been no word from him." Her voice was choked. "My daughter-in-law is wasting away, waiting for him. She takes her pitcher and goes up the mountain to the spring and just sits there, staring at the road."

The wooden spoon slipped slowly into the bowl.

"Where is he?"

"I had a letter from Baku. The priest read it to me. It said he was coming home in the autumn. But autumn came and then winter, and then spring, and he still hasn't returned."

A tear trembled on her chin. The abbot reached for the spoon but it was gone.

"I'll say a prayer for him. Tell me his name, and I'll write you a letter. I'll try to find out what I can."

"Thank you. Even if you're not an abbot, you can write a letter."

"But I am. As God is my witness, I am an abbot."

"Then write it down: Andranik Tekmekchyan, son of Manas."

Komitas wrote the name down in his music book.

"Go on, eat. Or don't you like it?"

"I'm not hungry." Komitas rose.

They went outside. Night had fallen. The starry sky stretched far beyond the mountains. A lamp dickered on the flat roof where the young women were making up his bed. Komitas kneeled. The old woman kneeled beside him.

"Most Gracious Lord, protect all wanderers," Komitas began.

"Amen," the old woman said.

The flame flickered and moved, for the young women had risen. One led the way, and the flickering lamp which she carried seemed but another flickering star. However, she climbed down the ladder, bringing the light to them, while the stars remained up above.

The young woman's face, lit by the uncertain flame, was etched against the surrounding darkness. She had dark eyes, winged brows and dimples in her cheeks.

"Whose soul are you praying for?" she asked.

"Go inside. It doesn't concern you," the old woman said.

"Most Gracious Lord, protect all wanderers," Komitas repeated.

"The Lord is deaf to your prayers. He will never hear you," the young woman said. He could see the mockery in her eyes. "He's never heard anyone yet, and He won't hear you now."

"Go on home," her mother-in-law said gently but firmly. "The Lord hears everything and the Virgin Mary does, too."

"Why are you appealing to God? If He was so good, He'd never have made His wife suffer so. He'd never have taken her son from her."

"It's a sin to speak of the Virgin like that. The Virgin was never a wife. Lord forgive us."

"Do you think I'm a wife? Andranik's gone to a foreign land. If your God is so kind, why won't He give me a child without a husband? Or was the Virgin prettier than me?"

Komitas gazed at her.

Seen against the dark background of the sky, her head, illumined by the lamp, seemed encircled by a halo. Her bright hair seemed aflame. There were dark shadows beneath her brows. The lamplight was reflected in her dark eyes, and the dimples in her cheeks were now filled with darkness, now with light. A golden strip of down on her upper lip gleamed in the darkness.

"You've disgraced us. Come inside," the old woman said, taking the young woman's hand.

Alone now, Komitas looked up at the sky. He was thinking of wanderers who had gone off, never to return, leaving behind their homes and their native land. Everything was silent and peaceful, yet it seemed to him that someone was shouting: "Armenians, do not leave your land! Who says our motherland is small? No motherland is small. There are only sons that are weak. Armenians, do not leave your homes! A conqueror will never live among ruins, but he will make an abandoned home his own."

As before, all was silence, the only sounds being the lowing of a cow and a dog barking somewhere in the distance.

Often, when he was alone, he would converse with himself. At such times his narrow parchment-white face would become thoughtful, his eyes would sink deeper, he would compress his lips so hard that they would turn blue. He would become distraught. Then hope would be rekindled and he would smile to himself. At such times people would look at the abbot in surprise, and Komitas would address them mentally, saying, "You do not wonder when I look morose, you simply say, 'Something must have happened.' But the moment I smile at my thoughts you're puzzled. My people, you have become used to everything, save joy." Thoughts crowded his mind. Komitas headed towards the house. The old woman stood in the doorway.

"Don't judge her too severely, Father. She's still young, and she feels that the Lord has forsaken her. May God's grace come to my son and daughter-in-law. Will you say a prayer for him?"

Komitas knelt by the doorway but he did not pray. He gazed up at the sky in silence, and his thoughts were not of God, but of his people. The woman would murmur "amen" from time to time, but he did not seem to hear her.

He returned to reality with a start.

"Amen," the old woman was saying.

"Amen," he repeated.

They rose.

"So you say you've come here to gather songs? My daughters-in-law don't sing. They are modest young women. Maybe they do when they go to pick herbs, or else softly at night, when everyone's asleep."

One of the young women carried out a lamp.

"See the abbot safely up the roof," the old woman said. Her daughter-in-law led the way, lighting the wooden stairs.

"Do you sing?" Komitas asked, as he climbed up after her.

There was no answer.

"What's your name?"

Still, there was no reply.

"I would very much like to hear you sing."

She set the lamp on the roof and hurried down again. There in the yard she whispered to her sisters-in-law, and he could hear their muffled laughter.

"You should have told him you have a husband. You should have said it was Eriknaz's husband that went away and never returned."

"Don't say things like that about her."

"Why not? She takes that pitcher of hers and goes off to the mountain and just sits there by the spring. She says she's waiting for Andranik. She doesn't believe in the Virgin, and she doesn't believe in God."

Komitas was not angry at them, but he felt sorry for Eriknaz.

"Send Eriknaz up for the lamp," one of the young women said, and the others laughed. Their laughter drifted over to the doorway. The door opened, and a square of light appeared and disappeared as quickly. Then all was quiet.

Komitas lay on his back with his head on his arms. He was surrounded by the fragrant aroma of hay. Sleep would not come. He kept listening, hoping to hear a song. Perhaps someone might begin to sing, a delayed traveller, a mother rocking her babe or a girl in love. An Armenian would never sing for you. To hear his song you would have to come upon him unawares. Should he follow the young women when they went to gather herbs? They would notice him. But even if they did not, he might not hear them sing. Perhaps that is why foreign travellers thought there were no Armenian songs. But is there a people that has no songs? He recalled the heated discussions at the monastery and the monk who had insisted that the *kyamancha* and *tar* were native Armenian musical instruments, that modulation was typical of Armenian songs which were always soulful and mournful.

"They don't know the Armenians," he thought bitterly. "The key to our soul is to be found in our architecture. Our monasteries are simple yet powerful. Our songs are the same: stern and unadorned."

He turned on his side. The tall spire of the village church was silhouetted against the dark sky, rising higher than the black fountains of the poplars. Now he thought of nothing, his eyes closed, and the blackness beneath his lids was a myriad of black dots, as if an unseen hand had scattered sesame seeds about. That is why the darkness that encompassed him was so boundless, so bottomless.

He awoke at dawn. A cricket was chirping in the hay at his side. It must have been chirping all night, but he had not heard it.

The old woman opened the cowshed. The sheep came tumbling out and were followed by a buffalo. Its blue-black hide seen against the lavender sky made it resemble a large ink blot, one that would begin to spread across the heavens and could never be wiped away.

The buffalo moved, bobbed its head and mooed.

"Eriknaz! The buffalo's out!" the old woman called.

Eriknaz manoeuvred it back into the shed. Then, picking up her pitcher, she started out again.

"Why are you going for water at the crack of dawn?"

"Andranik left at dawn."

From his perch on the roof he could see the paths leading into the mountains. The pitcher looked blue in the lavender haze. She climbed higher and higher, and gradually the pitcher became a part of her. For a moment Komitas fancied it was a pair of lovers, their heads bent close together, going to the spring, disappearing in the distance. And then he either thought he heard, or perhaps he did hear a song.

"She took a pitcher and went for water..."

He had heard the same song somewheres in the mountains, but could not recall whether it was at Aragat, Sipan, Bingel, or Aragats. Everywhere women took their pitchers into the mountains for water, everywhere one searched for one's loved one, and some found happiness and some did not.

It would soon be sunrise. The village lay at the foot of the mountain. The spring was at the top. From the roof he could see the spring and Eriknaz climbing towards it. Komitas rose and brushed the straw from his clothes. The paths

began at the spring and, twisting and turning, descended to the river in the valley and disappeared beyond the hills. He could hear a song coming from the spring up above. It was Eriknaz.

"She took a pitcher and went for water.. ."

In what mountains had this song been born? No one knew. Everywhere one searched for one's loved one, and some found happiness and some did not.

Komitas took out his music pad and began writing quickly. He sang the first bar with his eyes half-closed, gazing at the roads that were lost in the distance and thought he could see Eriknaz, bidding her husband farewell. She was barefoot, and her sun-tanned feet were drenched with dew, while the sun gleamed in her golden earrings. She had dimpled cheeks and winged brows.

"Send me word of yourself and come back soon," Eriknaz had whispered.

"When the stork returns and the children shout from the rooftops, 'Oh, stork! You've come again!' I'll return," Andranik had said.

He had set out on his journey, while Eriknaz had remained by the spring, her pitcher balanced on her shoulder.

Komitas felt that all this was happening now, before his very eyes, that Eriknaz had just bid her husband farewell and the man disappearing along one of the winding paths was Andranik.

"Eriknaz has brought some water, Father. Would you like to wash?" the old woman's voice brought him back to reality. He climbed down, washed and entered the house.

When his horse had been led out of the stable Komitas bid everyone farewell. As he was about to leave the old woman said, "Father, would you write Andranik a letter and ask him to write to us?"

Eriknaz said nothing. She stood beside her mother-in-law, gazing at the ground.

"As soon as I have word from him I'll come back to say Mass at your church."

... "May that Mass be blessed," the old woman said.

Months passed. Komitas received an answer to the letter he had sent to the Baku Diocese. "... Andranik Tekmek-

chyan, a wanderer, died in Baku last autumn. May the Lord bless his mother and widow. ..

He reread the letter and recalled his promise to say Mass at the village church. This time he put on his cassock and sent word of his arrival.

It was late summer. The cries of partridges could be heard from the mown meadows. It was very hot. His horse trudged along, but Komitas did not urge it on. He was in no hurry.

When he saw the village in the distance and the fieldstone house by the edge of the road, he turned his horse and approached from the opposite side in order to avoid meeting the old woman or Eriknaz.

The peasants had gathered in the churchyard. He noticed the two women at once. Komitas dismounted and approached them. The old woman kissed his hand but did not ask him anything. He sighed with relief. Then, glancing at Eriknaz, he realised that he could not avoid the burning question in her eyes. He must tell her about the letter.

Ding-dong, ding-dong, the church bell rang. The smell of incense spread through the yard. Komitas stood in the vestry, looking out at the congregation. They kneeled now along the wall. Eriknaz was not praying. She kept looking at the abbot, her eyes demanding: "Have you brought word of him?"

And then, to his own surprise, instead of saying a prayer, Komitas began to sing. His singing was barely audible:

"She took a pitcher and went for water,

She did not find, she did not find her loved one. .."

The village priest stared at the abbot in amazement. "Instead of saying Holy Mass in the House of God, he's singing of a loved one lost," the priest thought, "and the patriarch does not know of it, and God suffers it."

"What are you doing, Father?" the priest whispered. "You're in the Sarigiukh church, the Lord is looking down on us, the crucifix confronts us."

Komitas pretended not to hear.

"She took a pitcher and went for water..."

As he sang he looked at Eriknaz. The old woman was praying, and her shoulders shook with silent sobbing. Eriknaz did not pray. She was looking at the abbot, searching for the answer to her question. He was singing her song,

the one she had sung by the spring, the one she had sung for Andranik. The abbot was singing her song. She stared at him, but her eyes were expressionless. They did not even reflect the candlelight that flickered in the dim church. Suddenly she rose from her knees and ran out of the church.

Having finished the song, the abbot prayed for the souls of all wanderers who had left for foreign parts and would never return to plough their fields, to tend their gardens, to water their oxen. Having ended the prayer and the sermon, he left the church quickly.

The village priest followed him. "Father," he said, and his eyes narrowed, "is one allowed to sing songs in the House of God?"

"All of God belongs to man, and all that belongs to man is the Lord's," Komitas replied, knowing full well that the priest would hurry to inform the patriarch of what had happened.

Komitas took his leave of the peasants. He picked up the reins and headed towards the fieldstone house.

The old woman was waiting for him by the roadside. In silence they walked to the crossroads.

"Eriknaz went to the spring. She said, 'I'll bring down some water so that if a wanderer passes I can offer him a cool drink.'"

Komitas felt a lump in his throat. He was at a loss for words. The old woman's eyes had filled with tears. They glistened under the wrinkled lids and ran slowly down her cheeks.

"May the earth over his grave in a foreign land be light," the old woman whispered, and without saying goodbye she headed towards the fieldstone house.

Komitas stood at the crossroads, gazing after her bent figure. The hem of her patched skirt brushed the ground, raising a cloud of dust. He stood there motionlessly, as a mournful voice within him sang:

"She took a pitcher and went for water,

She did not find, she did not find her loved one..."

Where had this song been born? Where had he heard it before? Everywhere one searched for one's loved one, and some found happiness and some did not.

Hovannes Foimanian

MY FRIEND NESO

1

We village children were always happy together.

There was neither a school for us, nor lessons to learn. We were as free as birds and played all day long. Ah, how we played! What good friends we were, and how we all loved each other! When we'd feel hungry we'd run home for a chunk of bread and a piece of cheese from the crock, and then we'd be off again. Sometimes we would gather in the evenings to talk and tell stories.

One of the boys was named Neso. He knew so many stories and fairy-tales that there just was no end to them.

On summer moonlit nights we'd sit around in a circle on the logs piled in our yard and gaze enchantedly at Neso's face. He would become handsome with inspiration. He told us stories about Guri-Peri, about the bird of paradise and the kingdoms of Light and Dark.

"Come on, Neso, tell us another story. The one about the blind king, and the one about the parrot, and about the bald man and the beardless man."

2

One day they opened a school in our village. My parents sent me to school, as did about twenty or thirty others. Tuition was three rubles a year, and that is why many village children whose parents could not pay the fee were excluded. Most of my friends, including Neso, were not going to go to school.

We were being separated for the first time in our lives, and the school and the teacher were the ones who were separating us. Now, for the first time, we were given to

understand that some of us were better off, while others were poor. I can still hear Neso's wail as he rolled in the dust and cried: "I want to go to school, too!"

And I can still hear his father's voice, shouting: "For God's sake, can't you understand! I don't have the money! If I had three rubles I'd buy grain with it, so's you wouldn't all be hungry. I don't have the money!"

Neso and my other friends who were not at school would come around and cluster at the threshold, peeping in to have a look at us. But the teacher would not let them in. He chased them away. He wouldn't even let us play together during recess. He said that outsiders had no business playing with schoolchildren. My friends would walk off, sit down outside school and wait till we were let out. Then we would all walk home together.

Gradually during that first year I made new friends at school. By the end of the year Neso and my other friends who were not at school no longer waited outside for me.

3

I attended our village school for two years. Then my father took me to the neighbouring town and enrolled me in the secondary school there. This was a new world to me. All the houses had red roofs, and the townspeople were all dressed in fine, clean clothes. The school, too, was large and beautiful, and instead of one teacher, as we had back home, there were several, one of whom was a woman. This was a pleasant surprise to me.

In conformity with my new surroundings and school, my clothing, too, underwent a change. Now I wore a beautiful, clean, town school uniform. Thus transformed I returned to my village for my holidays. When Neso and my other old friends heard I was home they came by first thing in the morning, hanging about, trying to peep in. I went out to greet them. I don't know what we said to each other, but I do remember that our old camaraderie was gone. The first thing they noticed was my uniform. Neso cocked an eye at my short regulation shirt and said: "It looks like they pulled the feathers out of your tail!"

Everyone laughed. I was offended, but said nothing. Then

Neso felt the cloth of my jacket, and all the others followed suit. They all exclaimed at the softness of the material. It was then that I first really took notice of their clothes, of how filthy and torn they were. Indeed, the entire village appeared poverty-stricken and filthy to my eyes.

4

Two years later my father took me to a big city and enrolled me in a still larger school. When I returned from there my former playmates, now grown-up, came over, greeted me as did the other peasants and stood to one side respectfully, as they did. Just once during our conversation, when someone asked me whether I recalled our days together at the village school, Neso spoke up.

“Do you remember the way we used to sit around on the logs in your yard at night and tell stories?” he said.

“How could I ever forget that! That’s one of the nicest things I remember.”

I thought Neso seemed pleased, yet he remained at a distance, a stranger.

However, when the time came for me to return to the city my father hired a horse for me from Neso’s father. Neso was supposed to accompany the horse that I would ride. When we set out, I on horseback and Neso in his rags and decrepit sandals on foot, I felt miserable. After we had gone but a short way I said I preferred to walk and dismounted. We proceeded, either walking together or taking turns riding. Neso was pleased, but I realised that he did not understand my feelings of fairness and comradeship, but, rather, considered me foolish for walking. I felt hurt, but worse was yet to come.

We stopped on the way to have a bite. When we came to cutting the watermelon, I handed Neso my pocket knife. Then, when we were ready to start out again, I noticed that it had disappeared. Neso swore he had returned it and that I had put it in my pocket. Though I knew for a fact that he had not, I went through my pockets. Finally, we set off. It was obvious that he had taken the knife, and later people saw it on him. As we continued on our way my heart ached, not for my lost knife certainly, but for that far greater loss I had sustained and of which my companion was ignorant.

When we reached our destination and Neso was to return, I bought him a length of cotton for a jacket beside the fee for hiring the horse. He greeted this with: "But won't you give me a tip?"

I was terribly embarrassed. I tipped him. However, from then on, every time I recalled the days of my childhood and the moonlit nights as we sat on the logs with Neso telling us stories, my heart would fill with pain and pity.

5

"Neso is poor.... Neso is ignorant. ... Neso is crushed by the hopeless poverty of village life. ... If he had had an education, if he had been properly brought up and provided for, he might have turned out to be a much better person than I."

This is what I say to myself now when I think of Neso and try to absolve him, to raise him in my eyes and love him as I once did in my childhood. I want Neso always to appear to me as he was in those quiet, starry, moonlit nights, but I find this impossible, I cannot. Immediately another picture, one that is shameful and oppressing, comes to mind.

Having completed my education and made a place for myself in the world, I again returned to my native village. The village square was crowded and noisy that day. Neso stood bound to a post in the centre of the square, his head hanging in shame.

I was told that he was being punished for stealing. I intervened on his behalf and he was released. But in my mind's eye I still see him standing there in the scorching sun, bound to a post, his head hanging as the crowd rumbled.

Such things as stealing and flogging were commonplace in our village, but I cannot forget this event, as I cannot forget little Neso sitting on the logs on moonlit nights, telling us stories. Neso, so pure and sweet, Neso, my childhood friend.

Stefan Zorian

*THE GIRL FROM
THE LIBRARY*

A Tale Told by a Mother

I

Though our town is not very big, it is beautiful. It is edged by a forest and ringed by tall mountains. Gurgling streams rush down the mountain sides. At night, when the town is asleep, you can hear the waterfalls as a ringing and a splashing in your ears. Then the train, with its whistle piercing the air, rumbles towards the town, filling the mountains and forest with thunder, drowning out all other sounds. Our town is really lovely. There is a garden fronting each house and a well in each yard. The farmers bring their produce to town from all the neighbouring hamlets and villages. There's an abundance of milk, and eggs are very cheap. Winters are fleeting, and the summers are pleasant, with a cold breeze always. True, it often rains, but when the sun comes out again you'd think you were in heaven. In a word, Yerevan is as nothing compared to our town.

You may ask me why I've come to Yerevan since our town is so much better. If it were up to me, I never would have moved. My daughter talked me into it.

"Why don't you want to live with me?" she said.

What was I to do? She is all I have left in this world, my only daughter, my only joy. I used to be a laundress, but I managed to raise her and see her through school. Can I forsake her now and leave her all alone? "It's not right for us to be living so far apart," I said to myself, and finally agreed. If my son Yervand were alive I might have remained at home, but he went off to war and was never heard from again. To my joy, he was deferred the first year of the war as an only son, but then our landlord Mikhak and Attorney Vagarshak, the deacon's son, got after him* to enlist.

“You have to save the nation,” they said to him.

“Who’ll take care of my mother and sister if I volunteer?” Yervand said.

But they had a ready answer.

“Thank God, your mother is still able to work as a laundress. She’ll be able to support herself and your sister. And if they’re ever in need, we’ll always be glad to help. Why, look at you, a healthy, strapping fellow, sitting around at a time when every young man wants to fight to save the Armenian people. Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?”

Yervand was so fed up with their reproaches and badgering that the poor boy went and enlisted. He left, never to return. It hurts me to even talk about it.

After Yervand was gone, my daughter and I were left alone. We had a room in the landlord Mikhak’s house. He was a rich merchant who ordered carloads of fabrics from Tiflis for his shop. He was on friendly terms with the most influential people in town. You’d never see Mikhak without a starched shirt, a hat and a suit as neat as if he’d just got it from his tailor. He was one of the most important men in town. During the war Mikhak was member of the Draft Board, registering the young volunteers, and a member of the various war funds. Mikhak, his wife Liza and his daughters Anya and Sonya lived upstairs. My daughter Victoria and I lived downstairs, in the cellar. Most of the cellar was taken up with firewood and their provisions for the winter. We had a little room with a low ceiling, whitewashed walls, a brick floor and two narrow windows through which we could see the feet of the people passing by. I paid two rubles rent for the room and did the family’s weekly wash as well.

And that’s how we lived. I’d do washing by the day for different families, and Victoria went to school. I was an illiterate woman, but people who knew said she was a bright pupil. There were others, like Mikhak and his wife, who said, “Why’d you send her to school? You haven’t the money for it. She’d be better off helping you.”

But I’d have none of that. I was ready to starve if I had to, just to keep her in school, for she was all I had. Victoria graduated after Yervand was killed. I put in a request that they take her on at the library. Her work was not difficult. It was a Une position. She would check out books and sew

and paste the covers on those that were torn. Often she'd read far into the night at home.

"Come, Victoria, have a bite to eat," I'd say.

"Wait a minute. I just have another page left."

When she read aloud it was as fine as the priest reading in church. Sometimes she would talk about the books she had read and would tell me about the people who had written them.

"The man who wrote this was the son of plain, ordinary people, yet what a fascinating book this is," she'd say.

Victoria could read both Armenian and Russian. She would tell me about people in other lands and of those who grew rich while others suffered in poverty. There was much of what she said that I could not understand. Victoria liked to talk about big cities and about what life would be like many years after we had died. I'd listen to her and say, "What's the use, since we won't be around to see any of it!" "Yes, we will, Mamma. Some day we will."

It was about that time that we learned the tsar had been dethroned. What rejoicing there was! There were red flags out everywhere. For several days the streets were full of people. There were speeches and people laughed and shouted: "Long live the Revolution!" I did not know what "revolution" meant, but I felt that their joy would soon end, because a country could not exist without a tsar. Several days later Gaik Azatian arrived from Tiflis and made a speech. It was wondrous to hear him. He said that we had no more need for the former officials and chiefs and the mayor, because they were all the tsar's lackeys and had to be removed. Right after that they arrested our chief of police; that's when the judge and the forester ran off; that's when they tore the insignia off the guardsmen and even beat up some of them.

I saw it all with my own eyes. I wondered what they had against the guardsmen. Why were they to blame?

"It's only just, Mamma," Victoria said, "because they sold out to the tsar."

The meetings began soon after. My girl seemed to have no time to rest. There was her work at the library in the daytime, the meetings in the evening and her books and newspapers far into the night.

"Listen to me, child," I said. "You've finished school, so why must you be forever reading? You'll ruin your eyes."

"Oh, Mamma, you don't understand! There's still so much I haven't read. People go to Petersburg and Moscow to study at the universities. At least I can try to study at home."

"You'll end up by losing your eyesight and going out of your mind."

But would she ever listen to me? Often she'd go to bed with a book in her hand.

And it always made me angry. "If you don't care about losing your eyesight you might at least save on the oil. It's gone up."

But she'd say, "Don't bother me, Mamma. I'll buy you some more oil for the lamp. I have to speak at a meeting tomorrow, and I want to take some notes."

"What good are all those meetings? Is that the way to spend your time? Look at Mikhak's daughters. If there was any use in those meetings the landlord's daughters would be sure to go. They've had more schooling than you and they should know."

"Please don't set them up as an example. All they think about is clothes and chit-chat."

She was speaking the truth. The two young ladies would get dolled up every day to go to the theatre, the club or the railway station. They'd stroll up and down with their parasols all day.

"So what? At least they haven't cut off their hair like you and they don't chase around to meetings."

"Why do I need long hair? I'm not crazy about finding a husband like they are."

"Well, a girl is supposed to be interested in finding a husband. And who are those young men that go walking with you?"

"My comrades."

"You should have girls for friends, not young men, Victoria."

"Oh, dear! You simply don't understand, Mamma!" Indeed, I did not. The days were rushing by, with Victoria away at the library, then at her meetings, then busy reading. The neighbour women began dropping by to tell me that my daughter had made a speech here or made a speech there. I thought I'd go mad. "The girl's got out of hand completely," I thought. "I'll have to be more

strict with her.” The landlord had some unkind words for her, too.

“Your girl has some screws loose,” Mikhak said.

“Has she done anything wrong?”

“She’s been pampered and spoiled. She thinks she can interfere in everything and argue with her elders.”

“It’s her age. There’s nothing to be done about it. If she likes to talk, let her. After all, she doesn’t stay out nights like some I know.”

“I should hope not! You’re a poor woman and your daughter shouldn’t be forward.”

I could see he was upset about something, but I said nothing. That evening Victoria told me that she had called him a bourgeois at a meeting.

“Oh, no! I wish I were dead! How dared you? Who do you think you are? They know the family you come from. Do you want him to chase us out of our home?”

“He’d never dare! And if he does, so what? There’s any number of rooms like this.”

She was speaking quite loudly.

“Be quiet,” I begged. “They’ll hear you upstairs. We’ll be disgraced.”

“No, we won’t. But he might get in trouble.”

“What has he done? There’s not another man in town as fine as Mikhak.”

“A fine, upstanding man indeed! He pays his two clerks a pittance. Besides, he’s the school treasurer and he kept back the teachers’ pay for nearly four months and used the money to buy goods and get richer.”

“So what? Maybe he needed money. He paid them in the end, didn’t he?”

“What’s the use? You simply don’t understand.”

“How can I keep her from harm’s way?” I wondered.

“How can I lead her back to the straight and narrow?”

Nothing helped. I kept on working as a laundress, while she did as she pleased at that library of hers, speaking with whomever she pleased.

I would drop by at the library from time to time to ask her to do some chore and also see what she was doing. She was usually busy checking out books, but sometimes I saw her speaking with young men or girls. She would be talking to them about the meaning of some book, and she had a way

with each of them. She also argued with elderly people, even school-teachers, about things that an ignorant woman like me never heard of. One thing was certain: she always got the upper hand. "What a girl she is!" I thought in horror. "She doesn't feel a bit shy in the presence of her teachers." I'd be the one to blush for shame, not she.

"You have a very bold daughter. She's a real Bolshevik," one of her teachers said as I listened to them speaking at the library one day. "We can't make her change her mind."

I had heard of the Bolsheviks before, but, to tell the truth, I didn't know who they were. This time I found the courage to ask him.

"Why, they're people like your daughter," he said.

The news soon spread that some sort of assembly was to be elected to replace the tsar, though some people said a new tsar was going to be elected. Victoria told me that there wouldn't be any tsar, not a new one or an old one, but that there would be an assembly instead. And it would rule the country. The elections were only a few days away. There were big posters put up on our street calling everyone to vote. Victoria took part in the work, too. She still went to meetings and passed out slips of paper to the voters. In a word, she was busy all day long. Mikhak's wife Liza said, "Whom are you going to vote for, Anna?"

"How do I know? They'll manage without me," I replied. "You're wrong. I think you should vote. What number are you going to vote for?"

"I don't know. Victoria said I should vote for Number 5."

"Oh, no. I don't think you should. Number 4 is the one to vote for. It's the only real one. The others are all false numbers."

When Victoria came home I told her about our conversation.

"Don't you listen to her," she said angrily. "She and her husband are both false numbers!"

She began to explain why I should vote for Number 5 and then handed me a slip, saying that it was the one I was to drop in the ballot box.

On election day I headed for the school house. There

were five boxes nailed to the wall, with five people sitting next to them and a great crowd milling about. Our landlord was there, too.

"I see you've also come to vote, Anna," he said. "Which box are you going to drop your ballot in?"

I showed him the number I was holding. He took my slip and crumpled it.

"That's no good. Here, this is the one you want."

As there were people all around us, I was too embarrassed to say that Victoria had told me what to do. "What's the difference?" I said to myself. "I'll just drop it in the box and get out of here as fast as I can."

When Victoria discovered what had happened she was very upset. "Do you know what you've done? You've voted for your enemy. You don't even know what's good for you." "What enemy? You told me to drop my slip in a box and I did."

"There's a big difference. You should have voted for a man who has your interests at heart and will defend them." "God took my only defender from me the day Yervand was killed. Who will ever have my interests at heart now? Who will ever defend me?"

"You're wrong. Number 5 will defend us."

"I don't know anything about all this."

"Then why didn't you follow the advice of people who do?"

She was angry at me for not having listened to her.

From then on she'd get up at dawn every morning and rush off to the railway station. Then she'd return, gulp down her tea and rush off to the library.

"What's going on at the station?" I finally asked.

"I get the papers and books for the library there."

"Didn't you say you got them by post?"

"We get a lot by rail now."

However, I noticed that she left the papers she picked up at the station at home and never took them to the library.

"Why don't you take them to the library?" I once asked.

"I will."

She would often go to meet the evening train as well. And sometimes she'd return with one or two of her "comrades".

"Mother, I'd like you to meet my friends," she said and

then added, "They have no place to stay. We'll have to put them up for the night."

What could I have said? I could see they had no place to stay. I got out some clean sheets and the pillows from Victoria's dowry. "They may as well be comfortable," I said to myself. "After all, they are their mothers' children, too, and perhaps they're used to sleeping on soft pillows, even though they're far from home tonight." The young men slept over and were gone at the crack of dawn.

"Where have they gone?" I asked my daughter.

"To the neighbouring village."

A few days later one or the other would turn up again with a bundle of papers. Sometimes Victoria would bring them the papers she had picked up at the station. Then they'd be gone for several days. Finally, when I was beginning to think that I'd never see them again, they'd be back. Soon I realised that they were engaged in some sort of secret business. They would whisper among themselves, they'd arrive at dark and would leave at dawn, before the neighbours were up.

And they'd always turn back to make sure that no one was following them.

"This will surely lead to trouble," I thought.

How right I was.

2

It all happened on the 1st of May. To tell the truth, I had never known that May Day was a holiday.

That memorable morning two young men in workmen's blouses called. Victoria told them to come in. They asked about the banner. I forgot to mention the fact that several days before she had brought home a length of red cloth. She had worked on the banner the next two evenings, cutting white letters out of a piece of white cloth and pasting them on the red cloth. When it was done it read: "Long Live the Revolution!" It was very striking. The boys liked the banner and praised the workmanship.

Victoria always blushed if anyone praised her. This was no exception. She hurried them, saying, "Come, we've no time to talk. Take the banner, but don't unfurl it. I'll be right along."

The boys rolled up the banner and left.

“Why did they take it?”

“We need it for the holiday today.”

The first day she had begun working on the banner I had said nothing. I thought she was making it for the library, because twice since the tsar had been overthrown Victoria had embroidered banners for the library. But this time the boys practically smuggled it out of the house, and I wanted to know what it was all about.

“What sort of a holiday is May Day?”

“May Day is the working people’s holiday. Workers all over the world are celebrating today. Right now, this very minute, workers in all the cities of Europe and America are gathering together.”

“Is the holiday marked in our church calendar?”

“Why would the monks include it? The holidays they mark in their calendar are dedicated to non-existent saints.

They do that to fool the people, to keep them in ignorance.”

“Shush! Don’t sin! And what do you mean by ‘non-existent saints’? Do you think the monks are stupid? Do you think they make names for the church calendar?”

“No, they’re not stupid, they’re very clever. They try to confuse people like you to keep you in the dark, to keep you going to church and lighting candles and kissing the monks’ hands, believing them to be saints. Actually, there is no such thing as a saint. It’s all something the monks invented.”

I was dumbfounded.

“Shut up!” I screamed. “You’ll have God’s wrath upon us! He’ll send down a shower of stones upon our heads!”

I crossed myself in fear, but she laughed at me.

“My poor Mamma! Spare your efforts. There’s neither a god nor any saints up there. All there is above us is the merchant Mikhak and his shameless wife and daughters. That’s all. There’s no one else.”

“Be quiet! If they hear us they’ll turn us out!”

“They wouldn’t dare. We’ll soon show them who’s going to turn whom out. After all, they live in a house that was built by the labour of others.”

She kept on talking in the same vein for a while and then put on her coat and left. I was confused by all she had said. I knelt and prayed. Then I decided to buy some candles and go to church, but changed my mind. I had lighted so

many candles, pleading with the Lord to spare my son Yervand, and had my prayers saved him? No, I would not go to church. Perhaps Victoria was right after all. For if those saints had any power, my boy would not have been reported missing in action in a foreign land. Thinking of Yervand brought tears to my eyes. I decided to go out and see what sort of a holiday May Day was.

Our main street was so crowded there was no room for an apple to fall. It was a fine, bright day. A band was playing, people were singing, and children were running about. Many were dressed in their Sunday best, and everyone seemed to be waiting for something. Soon the parade began. First came some students, marching four abreast, behind their own band. Then came all the other students, and many were carrying banners. Then came the office workers, also carrying banners, and then came the troops behind a large banner and a band. They were followed by a float. It had an anvil and bellows on it and two men dressed as smiths were hammering iron, as if to say: see us working! Then there was an open carriage. The girl standing in it was dressed in white with her hair flowing down her back. She was tossing flowers to the crowd. Whatever will they think of next! Then came some more rows of people. All of a sudden, coming from the far end of the street, I saw a column of people and the banner Victoria had made. I recognised the red cloth and the white letters. They had nailed it to a long stick and were carrying it on high. The wind tore at the cloth, unfurling it, and everyone could read the words. I couldn't see Victoria at first. Then I spotted her, marching beside the men who were carrying the banner. She had on a red kerchief. The column was made up of youngsters, with just a few mature people scattered among them. I recognised a teacher and the lamp-lighter, and two girls Victoria's age.

Victoria's comrades began singing the *Internationale*.

Then the people in the crowd that followed began singing the Dashnak anthem. A well-dressed man in the crowd shouted: "Remove your hats! They're singing *Our Motherland!*"

Everyone headed towards the railway station. I followed the crowd. They were saying that there'd be speeches at the station.

I thought I might as well go along and hear what they had to say, since I was out anyway. I had nothing to do at home, and perhaps I'd hear something of interest.

There must have been about twenty thousand people at the station square. Mikhak, his wife and daughters were also there. They were all dressed in their finery. When Mikhak caught sight of me, he said, "Why, Anna, are you here, too? That means there's no one left at home. What if we're robbed?"

"Nothing will happen. I want to see what sort of a holiday this is."

They walked on, but I remained where I was. I had never seen so many people in my life. The band kept on playing. Finally, a man in a starched shirt began to speak. I recognised him at once. It was the Attorney Vagarshak, the deacon's son, the very same one who had got my Yervand to enlist several years before. He looked about, cleared his throat and said: "Comrades! Today the entire world is celebrating May Day."

He went on and on, speaking in such a learned way that I couldn't make out half of what he was saying. He ended by waving his hat and shouting: "Long live May Day!"

The band struck up a song. Many men in the crowd removed their hats.

Then one of the teachers spoke. He, too, went on and on and also ended by shouting: "Long live May Day!" There were many more speakers. Some spoke calmly and slowly, others waved their hands about in a frenzy and shouted at the tops of their voices, but they all ended the same way: "Long live May Day!" The band played after each speech, the men removed their hats, everyone clapped and shouted "Hooray!". Suddenly I saw Victoria on the speakers' platform. She had on her red kerchief and was holding on to the banner. My heart skipped a beat.

"Who is she? Who's the girl?" I could hear people say in g-

"She's the girl from the library."

I was worried to death. Was that a way for a girl to be behaving? My knees turned to water, my heart was pounding, and my mouth went dry. "What if Mikhak sees me? What will he say?"

Victoria began to speak.

“Comrades! Everything that’s been said here is a pack of lies, because these gentlemen’s words have nothing to do with their deeds. They say that all working people must unite, but they don’t want to unite with the Russian workers who are fighting for the happiness of all working people. I repeat: everything these gentlemen have said is lies. And the people must know it, because they are the enemies of the people.”

All the other orators had spoken about the holiday, but all she spoke about was the people, the government and the system.

“What sort of a government do we have that is constantly at war and that oppresses the people? We don’t need this kind of a government at all!”

I hadn’t understood what the teacher and Vagarshak had spoken about, but every one of her words fell as a heavy weight upon me. I felt like leaving, but then I decided to stay on. “What if they fall upon her and beat her like they did the tailor’s son Makar for daring to speak out against them?”

I was on tenterhooks all during her speech, and I don’t even know how long it lasted, but as soon as she was through I felt as though a weight had been lifted from my heart. There was shouting in the crowd. It seemed that the holiday was over. Victoria descended from the platform. I tried to make my way towards her, to scold her soundly, but the crowd was too dense, and so I headed back home.

I was crestfallen. Now, in my old age, after having lived an honest life, I was to become the laughing-stock of the town. Such were my thoughts as I sat by the gate. Mikhak and his family were returning. At the sight of me he exclaimed: “I certainly feel sorry for you, Anna! How’d you ever manage to bring up a girl like that?”

“That’s no girl!” his wife said angrily. “She’s a wildcat! She’s mad! How could you have given birth to a traitor?” she demanded, turning to me.

While the parents berated me, their daughters giggled.

“Your daughter spoiled our holiday!” Mikhak continued. “You’d be better off with no daughter than one like that.”

“She’s disgraced the two of you!” his wife chimed in.

I was silent, though I agreed in my heart that Victoria had acted foolishly.

I was beginning to worry. Where could Victoria be? She finally returned, pale, exhausted and out of breath.

"Don't wait up for me, I won't sleep at home tonight," she said.

"Why not?"

"They want to arrest me."

"Who?"

"The government."

"What for?"

"For the speech I made today."

I was stunned. I wanted to scold her, but she said, "I have no time to listen to you, Mamma. You don't seem to understand. I have to leave."

"Where to?"

"I'll find a place."

"Where are you going? Where will you stay?"

She was silent.

"Take pity on your poor mother. If you can't trust me, whom can you trust?"

I finally coaxed her into telling me.

"I'm going to stay with my aunt, but you mustn't breathe a word of it to anyone."

My sister-in-law lived by the station, at the other end of town.

"How long will you stay there?"

"I don't know."

Victoria was gathering up her papers, letters and books hurriedly. She tied them into a small bundle, grabbed her summer coat and was out of the room. She was as pale as a ghost. I wanted to see her off, but she protested. Yet, I couldn't sit idly by. As soon as she was gone I went out as far as the gate. The night was as black as pitch and my soul was troubled.

"Dear Lord," I prayed, "have mercy on my lost and wayward child!"

3

I did not know whether one, two or five hours had passed since Victoria had left. Mikhak and his family had long since gone to bed upstairs, but I could not sleep. I lay shivering in my bed. Suddenly I heard footsteps coming down

the stairs. Then someone knocked at our door. At first I thought that all had turned out well and that Victoria was back. The knocking was repeated. This was not her light rapping. Besides, she would always call out, "Mamma!" No, someone was now kicking at the door. My heart sank. Who could it be? It was nearly midnight.

"Who's there?"

"Open up!" a man's voice replied.

I threw on some clothes and went over to the door.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"It's the patrol. Open up."

I was still. There were several people standing outside the door. Perhaps they were bandits. There had been many cases of assault and robbery lately. The robbers would make their way into a house or rob people in the streets. Fear gripped my heart.

"What do you want?"

"Open up and you'll find out."

"I can't. I'm all alone. And it's late. What do you want?"

"I'm warning you, if you don't open the door we'll break it down!"

Then I heard Mikhak awakening upstairs. He coughed, got up and began pacing up and down. This gave me courage.

"Well, even if they are robbers, he'll hear me now that he's awake," I thought.

I opened the door. Several armed men entered.

"Who is Victoria Danelian to you?"

"She's my daughter. But she's not here now."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know. She left in the evening and hasn't come back yet."

"Where'd she go?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean?" the one who seemed to be in charge shouted. "She's your daughter and it's your business to know where she is. Well? Where is she?"

"I don't know. How am I supposed to know? I swear I don't know."

"I'll never believe that."

I didn't know what to say. Just then Mikhak appeared.

"What's going on here?"

“We’ve come for Victoria Danelian.”

I felt better with him there. I thought they’d feel embarrassed and leave, but instead they began searching the room. They didn’t miss a corner, turning everything inside-out, going through every stitch we owned. Still, they couldn’t find Victoria. They left me a slip of paper and said it was a receipt for the fifteen books they were taking. First they signed it and then they told Mikhak to sign.

“See, Anna? Now you know why I told you to keep a tight rein on your daughter,” Mikhak said when they were finally gone. “I could see where she was heading.”

“Yes, it’s God’s truth! But what shall we do now? How can I save my child? She’s frail and will die of fright.”

“It’s too late now. No one can help her after that speech she made today.”

He turned and left. I couldn’t sleep a wink. It was still dark when I got up to straighten the room, and it took me several hours to put everything back in place. The neighbours learned that the police had searched our room, and later in the day they came by. Each one wanted to know what had been said and what questions had been asked. Yukhaber, a woman from the next house who always sat outside by the gate knitting socks and eating sunflower seeds, knew all the latest gossip. She would drop by now and then to chat. When she learned that they had come for Victoria she exclaimed: “May I be struck blind!” and then went on to say that many Bolsheviks had been arrested during the night.

“Tell Victoria to keep out of sight for several days. She’s a girl and if they arrest her and put her in jail it’ll ruin her reputation. If she doesn’t have a safe hiding place, tell her to come to me and I’ll hide her.”

She spoke so gently and with such compassion that I couldn’t help thinking what a warm-hearted woman she was.

“Thank you anyway, but she’s safely hidden away.”

“Where?” Yukhaber asked.

Silly me, I replied, “At her aunt’s house near the station.”

“Oh,” she said in a strange voice and pursed her lips.

I could have bit my tongue. If she told anyone, the news would soon spread. A word spoken and a newborn babe are both to be heard from afar.

That is exactly what happened.

Two days later Victoria was arrested at her aunt's house. "What have I done?" I berated myself. I went straight to Yukhaber.

"My daughter's been arrested at her aunt's house. You were the only one who knew where she was."

"I never breathed a word to anyone," she said, but she turned red and averted her eyes.

Only later did I learn that her brother, who was a police spy, had sent her over to worm the information out of me.

It was no use bewailing my fate. I was responsible for Victoria's arrest and I would have to do everything possible to set her free.

The next morning I set out for the prison to see her and find out how she was, for I had heard that they beat the prisoners. However, I was told that there was no one by that name in the prison, and that perhaps she was being held at the school. Since the jail was overcrowded, the new prisoners were being taken to the schoolhouse.

"Is Victoria Danelian here?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Can I see her?"

"No."

"But I'm her mother."

"So what? Not even if you were God Himself. Go get a pass, then we'll let you in."

I went to the chief warden and got a pass. They let me inside and then went for Victoria. Her coat was thrown over her shoulders. She came along the corridor, carrying her bobbed head high. There was a guard beside her. When she saw me she said, "Why have you come, Mamma?"

And she spoke as calmly as if nothing were amiss.

"How can I get you out of here, dear? Who shall I go to see? Who shall I ask to help us?"

"Don't ask anyone."

I thought she was mad.

"I'll go to Mikhak. I'll ask him to help."

"Please don't. I'd rather spend the next ten years here than have him intervene on my behalf."

"Why? What has he ever done to harm you?"

"Mikhak is our enemy."

And she began to speak. The soldier who was guarding

her listened to every word. I winked at her, to draw her attention to him, to show her that we weren't alone, but she paid no attention.

"No matter what you say, I'll do everything I can to get you out. There's no one else but Mikhak for me to go to. I'll ask him to help."

"If I find out that I've been set free on his guarantee, I'll come right back to prison."

I paid no attention to the nonsense she was speaking. Once outside the school, I went straight to Mikhak.

"You're the only one who can help me," I said. "Please do something to get my daughter out."

"This is none of my affair. Go and see the chief of police." And he showed me to the door. I didn't dare go to the chief of police. Instead, I decided to talk to the people who worked in the various committees and knew my daughter. I went to see Victoria's teacher, the one she had argued with in the library that day.

"I can't do a thing," he said. "It's none of my business. Your daughter has stirred up such a mess that I can't have anything to do with it."

"But it's only because she's so young. She didn't know what she was talking about or what she was doing."

"You're wrong. She knew exactly what she was doing. Your daughter is a traitor to her nation. She wants us to call in the Russian Bolsheviks and let them destroy our country."

I saw there'd be no help coming from him and decided to go to our parish priest. Perhaps he would help. He knew the people who were higher up. But he said the same thing.

"Your daughter's a traitor to her nation. I can't do a thing for her."

"Father! In the name of all that is holy, I beg you to help us!"

He paced up and down, his hands in the pockets of his cassock, paying no attention to me. No amount of pleading helped. Father Barseg refused to do anything for me.

"That's a priest for you," I thought. "He always said that we must help the poor, but here I am, in trouble, and he's turned his back on me. That's a holy man for you."

I was crushed. I finally decided to go to the top official. There was a long waiting line to see him. I sat down and

listened to the talk. Here a daughter or a son had been arrested, there a woman's husband. They said that about eighty Bolsheviks had been arrested in all. If the person the police had come for was not at home, they took a father, brother or wife as a hostage and then searched the house. A woman in black approached me.

"Are you Victoria Danelian's mother?"

"Yes. Why?"

Her face was tear-stained, her eyes were wet from weeping.

"Look at what your daughter's done to me! She's brought grief and sorrow to my house!"

And she began to weep again. I didn't know what she was talking about.

"Why?"

"Your daughter gave my Ashkhen forbidden books to read and got her all confused. And now they've arrested my daughter."

She wept as she spoke, and though she kept dabbing at her eyes, the tears flowed freely.

"She's my only daughter, and now they've taken her from me."

"My dear sister, what can I do? Do you think I wished for this?"

"Your daughter is to blame for many things," I heard another woman say. "How could Ashkhen have resisted? Victoria had a way with everyone, she spoke so convincingly that they couldn't help doing as she said. My son was one of them, and now he's been arrested, too."

Then other women came up to me. But they didn't blame either me or Victoria. They shared my grief and spoke of how we could help to free our children.

When it was my turn to see the chief a young fellow came up to me and said, "You're wasting your time. The chief won't listen to what you say anyway."

"Why not?"

"Because they know your daughter's a Bolshevik. They found some papers on her. She won't be able to prove she's innocent."

"No matter what," I thought, "I'll find out what they have against her. I'll plead for her. I'll say that she made a mistake, that she's still very young and will change her

ways from now on, if only they'll pardon her. Maybe he'll take pity on me and let her go."

These were my thoughts as I entered his office. A long-haired young man with a waxed moustache sat behind the desk. This was the chief. Sitting beside him was Attorney Vagarshak. He was well-dressed, as always. I approached them timidly and bowed low. They looked me over.

"Well?" the chief said.

"I've come to plead for my daughter."

"Who is she? What's her name?"

"They arrested her yesterday. My son was a volunteer, he was killed during the war, and she's all I have. And now they've arrested her. What shall I do? Tell me what I can do."

"What's her name?"

"She's the girl from the library. Victoria Danelian."

The chief looked at Vagarshak and then snorted.

"So she's your daughter? Well, what do you want?" Somehow, his voice had changed.

"I'm asking you to set her free. She's so young, something might happen to her. There's no one left at home. Just the two of us. She's all I have now. And she's so young. It's all a terrible mistake!"

"Hm! I'm glad you think so. So she made a mistake, did she?"

He and the lawyer exchanged glances and both of them laughed. I couldn't take it any longer and flew at Vagarshak: "What are you laughing about? You and Mikhak got my boy to enlist, and then he was killed. And now you want to take my only daughter from me!"

He turned pale.

"One thing has nothing to do with the other," he said, pushing his glasses up higher on his nose.

"Why not? These are both my children. I raised both of them."

"That has nothing to do with anything, because one of them, namely, your son, loved his country and went off to fight for its liberation, while your daughter has joined up with a bunch of traitors."

He spoke very pompously and then rose.

I became angry.

"In the first place, my son didn't enlist of his own accord.

You got him to enlist and then sent him off to be killed. You promised to help me, but you've never given me a copper. And now this thing about my daughter. Why is she supposed to be a traitor? So she delivered a speech. But she didn't even know what she was talking about, because she's still hardly more than a child. Is that something to arrest someone for?"

"Who's talking about her speech? That's the least of it. Your daughter was secretly in contact with the Bolsheviks. She received sums of money from them to be used against our government."

"May I be struck blind if that's so!" I said. "The only money she ever had was her wages. And she always gave me her pay. My daughter's not guilty of anything. It's all a lot of lies."

"No, it's not. Your daughter was one of the ringleaders. She's a traitor. She's sold out her country."

The blood rushed to my head.

"You're the ones that are mixed up in all sorts of shady deals! My daughter is better than the lot of you. She's innocent, but you..."

The chief pressed a button and a young man entered.

"Get this old hag out of here!" he said.

4

That day all my hopes were dashed. I could only rely on God now, even though I had lost my faith after the death of my son. Still, a small hope flickered. I thought that if He had been unmerciful towards my boy, perhaps He would take pity on us and shield my daughter. I went to the prison every day. Victoria had been transferred there, and I brought her food and clean linen. I had no work now, because I was getting on in years and it was too difficult for me to do a big wash. Whenever I did get a day's work in a rich family they'd berate me for having brought up a daughter who was a traitor.

They said she'd got money in secret to be used to harm Armenia. And goodness knows what else. Many of my neighbours were sorry for me, but they were afraid of being too friendly.

Soon my money ran out. I recalled that Victoria hadn't

picked up her last month's pay at the library and decided to go for it.

"There's no back pay due her," the head librarian said.

"But she didn't get her last month's wages."

"I've been told not to pay out anything."

And so I got nothing. I continued taking her a bit of cheap food each day, like lettuce and potatoes, and only managed to fry her some meat patties twice.

One day I saw a large crowd outside the prison. Everyone was looking at the prison walls and at the yard. There were pieces of bread, cheese and meat and broken cups and plates on the pavement. A strange humming sound could be heard inside the prison.

"What happened? Who threw all this food out?" I asked.

"The Bolshevik prisoners."

"Why?"

"Because one of the prisoners was beaten today and they've started a hunger strike."

My heart began to pound. I could hardly breathe. I went over to a man in a felt hat and said in a trembling voice: "Do you know who was beaten, Sir?"

"Some young fellow."

I calmed down a bit at his words and wanted to leave Victoria her food, but the guard wouldn't accept it.

"Why not?" I asked.

"There's been an order not to accept any more food."

"Why not?"

"That's none of your business."

One of the guards was a young man from Kars with large eyes and a scar across his forehead. He was always nice to me and called me "m'am", and never refused me a favour. He wasn't around that day, though. While I was speaking to the guard on duty the prisoners inside began singing the *Internationale*. They sang so loudly it made the glass in the windows rattle. I could hear Victoria's clear, high voice above the others. The singing was coming from every cell. The wardens scurried back and forth, trying to make them stop, but in vain. I was terror-stricken. "They'll kill them all now," I thought. But still, they kept on singing, and Victoria's voice rose above the rest. I could not hold back my tears.

"I can hear you, Victoria!" I shouted.

The head warden rushed over to me. "Who are you? What are you shouting about?" he demanded.

"I'm Victoria Danelian's mother. That's my daughter singing."

I thought that would soften his heart, but it only enraged him more.

"Get out of here before I...."

Just then the young guard I knew from Kars came over and whispered, "You'd better leave now, M'am."

I did as he said.

"It's no use today, but bring some food tomorrow," he advised as he walked to the gate with me.

"They haven't beaten Victoria, have they?"

"No, don't worry. It's just that the prisoners refuse to accept any food."

"But why? Do they want to be hungry?" All the while I was thinking that they must be mad for refusing good food.

"They won't starve themselves. Don't you worry."

"Can't you let me see her? I'll try to talk some sense into her. After all, she's still so young she doesn't know what she's doing."

"It's no use. She'll never eat anything if her comrades don't."

"Maybe they're afraid of the prison food. Give them what I've brought."

"It makes no difference. And anyway, we can't accept what you've brought. They've got to eat prison rations."

He went on to explain that this was a hunger strike and that it was the Bolsheviks' way of protesting against what was going on in the prison. Such foolishness made no sense to me.

Back home again I could neither eat nor drink. And how could I when my daughter was hungry? I did not sleep a wink that night.

That evening there was a party at Mikhak's. It was his wife's birthday. I sat curled up on the couch, listening to the music and the noise, the singing and shouting coming from upstairs. There was a flourish after each toast and the singing continued into the small hours. Then they moved the tables and chairs aside and began to dance. The stamping made the ceiling rock and I wondered whether it wouldn't come down on my head.

The merrymaking went on all night. Finally, at dawn, they went out into the upstairs terrace and began to sing and dance again. My grief, on the one hand, and the bedlam upstairs, on the other, kept me up all night.

At the crack of dawn I boiled some eggs and some milk for Victoria and set off again.

But they would not accept the food, saying that the prisoners still refused to eat. This went on for three more days. The prisoners sang each day, with my daughter's voice rising clearly above the others.

On the fourth day, when I had again brought her some food, I was told not to bother any more.

"Why not?"

"The prisoners are being taken to Yerevan."

"Why?"

"You needn't know why," the boy from Kars said. "I didn't explain anything to the others, but I'm sorry for you, and that's why I've told you this much."

I felt that something was going to happen. I had heard of prisoners being executed in secret while the guards continued to accept food for them, as if they were still alive. That's how they executed Matso. His family only learned about it a week later. I begged the boy to tell me when they were going to transfer the prisoners, and all the while my knees were shaking.

"I can't tell you any more. You should be thankful I've said as much as I have."

"Oh, thank you, thank you. But please tell me, I beg you to. If you've any heart at all, please tell me."

"I tell you I can't! Do you want me to be arrested and shot?"

"They won't do anything to you. There's only the two of us here. No one but God can hear us. Just tell me when they'll transfer them. Will it be at night? Or in the daytime?"

He finally took pity on me. "Tonight at midnight," he said. "But if you breathe a word of this to anyone. ..."

"Never you fear. I'm not insane."

I ran home to prepare some food for Victoria to take along on the journey. I boiled some eggs and a chicken and wrapped some cheese in a large flatcake. I made a small bundle of the food, two changes of linen and a dress. It was

shortly before eight when I set out for the station. "I'd better come early," I thought. "Who knows, they may decide to take them earlier. I'd rather wait at the station than sit around at home."

While at home, it had seemed to me that Victoria was already on the way and that I would never see her again. These thoughts made my head spin. There was not a single person in the world whom I could go to for comfort. I picked up my little bundle and set off, but I was so weak I could barely walk. The streets were dark and muddy, for it was a black, starless night. I finally made it to the station and sank down on a bench to rest. There were many people waiting for the train.

A man came over to me and said, "Where are you going, lady?"

"No place. They're taking my daughter away, and I've come to see her off."

"Who's taking her? Where to?"

"The authorities. They've arrested her and they're taking her to Yerevan."

"Why did they arrest her?"

"They say it's because she's supposed to be a Bolshevik."

The man was silent. He said "Ahem!" and then added, "Will they let you speak to her?"

"Why shouldn't they? After all, I'm her mother." Victoria was all I had left in the world. Would I ever see her again? And could anyone forbid us to say a few last words to each other?

The man shook his head and walked off. I noticed a group of soldiers close behind him.

"Make way! Make way!" they shouted and dispersed the crowd.

What was the matter? Then I saw the prisoners.

My heart pounded wildly. Victoria must be among them. The soldiers pressed against the crowd, but I made my way towards them to get a glimpse of Victoria if she were there. No matter how I strained my eyes, I could see nothing. The soldiers had formed a tight band around the prisoners, the night was black, and my eyes were so full of tears that I could see nothing.

Then, in the darkness, surrounded by soldiers, the prisoners began to sing the *Internationale*. I can't describe their

singing. People were running towards them from all sides. In no time a huge crowd had gathered. I recognised Victoria's voice at once. At the sound of my poor child's voice I shouted, as I had outside the prison: "I can hear you, Victoria!"

I tried to move in closer, but no sooner had I taken a step than a soldier shouted: "Back! Get back!"

I wished he would choke on his words.

Then I tried to approach from the other side, but another soldier shouted, "Move back!"

I was shoved so hard I nearly fell.

Meanwhile, the prisoners were singing their anthem.

I wanted to shout again, to let Victoria know that I was there, but the locomotive's whistle pierced the air, and the train thundered into the station.

When it had pulled to a stop the prisoners were herded into the first car. It had bars on the windows, like a prison. I followed them, carrying my little bundle. There was a terrible commotion on the platform. I nearly lost sight of the prisoners, but recognised the bayonets on the soldiers' rifles. I ran up to the car just as the last prisoner was boarding, with the armed soldiers right behind him. Would they be off without my having glimpsed my child for the last time? No matter what, even if they ran a bayonet through my heart or threw me under the wheels, I'd have a few last words with Victoria!

I stood outside their car and shouted: "Victoria! Victoria!"

Luckily, the soldiers didn't know whom I was calling to and so said nothing. But Victoria heard me and called from behind the barred window: "Mamma! Goodbye, Mamma!"

"My sweet, I've brought you some food and some clothes."

But I had no chance to say any more, for one of the wardens grabbed me by the hand and yanked me away. "Move off! You're not allowed to speak to the prisoners!"

"Get her out of here! She's not allowed here!" the head warden shouted.

"Why not? Where are you taking my daughter, you scoundrels? My daughter's no Bolshevik, my daughter's..."

I kept on shouting and trying to get closer to the car, but they blocked my way.

"Don't worry, Mamma! And don't talk to those jailors. I am a Bolshevik and I don't care what they do to me!" Victoria shouted.

"Don't worry. Go back home," her comrades called to me.

How could I not worry? I tried to fight my way back to the car and wept.

A crowd had gathered around us. All my efforts to get closer were in vain. The third bell pealed.

"Goodbye, Mamma!" Victoria cried.

As the train began to move the prisoners took up their song again. I ran after them, calling, "Victoria! Victoria!"

The train was gaining speed, but still I ran on.

I can't recall what happened after that. I came to my senses in the morning. I was at the station, in the barman's room. A barmaid in a white apron was standing beside me, looking down at me with concern.

"How do you feel, lady?" she asked. And she told me that I had fainted and that two railway workers had carried me back into the station house. They had called a doctor, given me something to bring me to, and then I had fallen asleep.

A short while later two young men wearing the uniform of railwaymen came to visit me. It was they who had carried me back to the station the night before.

"How are you feeling? You certainly are a brave woman. We saw you running after the train, shouting 'Victoria!' What do you think your heart is made of? And who's Victoria?"

"My daughter."

"That's what we thought."

They told me that they both knew her. "She's our comrade," one of them said. "Don't you worry, everything will be all right."

Thank the Lord for boys such as those. They comforted me and quelled my fears. Then they treated me to tea and put me in a cab.

When I was settled inside, one of them bent over and whispered, "If you ever need anything, come to us. Victoria is our comrade and that means you are like a mother to us. Never feel shy to come to us for help. My name is Petre."

His words encouraged me. It meant that there were still good people in the world.

Suddenly I remembered my bundle. It was gone. I was not sorry for the lost bread, chicken or eggs, but I had put Victoria's clothes in it, too.

The neighbours were surprised to see me driving up in a cab. I'm sure they were all thinking the same thing: "How's that for a washer-woman—riding around in a cab!"

Actually, I had only been in a cab twice before in my life. Once, when Mikhak's wife had fallen ill, they had sent me to look for a cab. The driver had said, "Come on, get in!" The second time had been when I was still a child.

As I drove up I saw Liza standing on the terrace. She said with a smirk, "My! Hasn't Anna become a grand lady, riding around in a cab!"

Her scorn tore across my grieving heart like a knife, but I said nothing.

"Hey, Anna!" she shouted.

The way I felt, I didn't even look up.

"Come over here, I want to tell you something."

"What?"

"Come up and scrub the floors."

"Life is always a joke to you. Well, don't count on me."

"Why not? What's the matter?"

"They've taken Victoria to Yerevan."

And do you know what she said? She said, "It serves her right for being a traitor. But why should you get upset over it. Come on up, don't make me ask you again. I want you to scrub the floors."

I was enraged. "Don't you think I'm a mother to grieve for my child? A dog worries over its pups, and am I worse than a dog? I'm in no state to scrub floors now." And I went downstairs.

From then on Liza stopped speaking to me and never called me in if there was a job to do. She found another woman to do her housework. But the woman didn't know how to launder fine clothes. She wrung everything out so hard that it tore the material, and she always added so much blueing you'd think everything was dyed blue.

Two or three weeks passed, but there was no word from Victoria. I was fretful and worried and couldn't sleep nights.

Each day I waited for the postman in vain. I told him that if there was a letter for Anna Danelian and I wasn't at home he was to drop it into my room through the broken pane. I didn't want Liza or her daughters to get their hands on Victoria's letter. Another month passed, but there was still no word from Victoria. All sorts of thoughts crossed my mind. What if she had been executed? Petre consoled me. "Don't worry about not having any letters from her," he said. "I know for certain that they reached Yerevan and are all well."

I went to see him several times and each time he tried his best to dispel my fears. What a fine boy he was! He would always add, "Don't forget, whenever you need anything, come to me. I'm like a son to you, and you're like a mother to me."

But I never did ask him for help, though I was in great want. How could I have asked him for money? Another month passed and a week after that. Finally, I received a short note. It said, "Dear Mamma, I'm well. Cheer up, don't worry about me. Victoria."

That's exactly what she wrote: "Don't worry about me." And this when my every waking hour was filled with concern about her.

A short while later I received another note from her.

In November, when six months had passed and I was beside myself, I finally mustered up my courage and went to Petre.

"I want to go to Yerevan and see Victoria, Petre."

"She's in no danger now. There's no reason for you to go. I had word that Comrade Victoria is well," he began.

"But I must go. Just to have a look at her."

"Do you have the fare?"

"No. But I have a carpet. I can sell it."

Petre was silent for a while.

"Well, if you've really decided to go, there's no need for you to spend your last penny on the fare. I'll put you on the train as my mother. I have a right to travel free of charge."

"Oh, thank you, son. May God fulfil all your wishes."

"It's my duty. I owe Comrade Victoria so much. But where do you intend to stay when you get to Yerevan?"

I hadn't thought of that. I couldn't sleep in the streets,

and I didn't know a soul. And the weather had turned cold. There was snow in the mountains already.

"I really don't know, Petre. I don't know anyone in Yerevan. I've never been there before. I've never even been on a train in my life."

Indeed, I had never been farther than our town, not counting the few times I had made the pilgrimage to Sarigiukh in the mountains.

I had often been to the railway station, to see the summer residents off and help them settle their boxes in their compartment, but I'd never gone anywhere myself.

"Don't worry about a thing. I'll speak to a conductor I know and ask him to take you to Artush, a very close friend of mine who lives near the station in Yerevan."

Bless Petre's heart, that's just what he did.

I took Victoria's remaining clothing, an old skirt, a sweater and some stockings, and made a small bundle. I put some food in another bundle. Then I put on several dresses on top of each other, took my shawl and locked the door behind me.

I climbed the stairs to Mikhak's place, thinking, "I'm going so far, and who knows whether I'll ever return. You can never tell what might happen to you.... So I might as well say goodbye to them and set out with a clear conscience. I'll ask them to keep an eye on my room, even though I did put a padlock on it. After all. I'm their lodger and I should tell them where I'm going."

It was close to eight in the evening and dark already. Mikhak and Liza were having tea and jam. He had unbuttoned his shirt collar, as always, and she had on a cashmere shawl. Their daughters were admiring their new dresses in front of the mirror in the corner. Oh, those daughters! I did not like them. They'd powder their faces, paint their lips and be off, walking up and down the boulevard and as far as the railway station. That's all they ever did. At home they were forever at each other's throats or scrapping with their mother, but the moment they were out in the street it'd be: "Anya-dear and Sonya-dear!" As if they really were the best of friends. At home they hated each other, but outside they cooed like doves!

Even though I was an ignorant woman and didn't know much, I knew all about how girls and women behaved.

The moment they saw me the girls exchanged glances and began to giggle.

"Look who's here!" they said.

They probably thought I'd come to borrow money. But I paid no attention to their mocking glances. I set my bundles down by the door, took off my shoes, threw my shawl over my arm and walked up to the table. I bowed low and said, "Good evening".

Liza turned away. Mikhak frowned. His eyes were hostile as he muttered, "Good evening. Is there anything special that's brought you here?" He seemed to be forcing himself to speak.

"No, Sir. I hope you're all well. I'm leaving for Yerevan." The words had barely escaped my lips when Liza spun around and shrieked, "What have you come for? Money for your fare? So you've remembered about us, now that you're in need, have you? Well, you can save your breath. Go and borrow from the people you work for. I've had enough! Think of all the years we've supported you! 'I'm off to Yerevan!' Aren't you something! Maybe you expect us to have a carriage ready and give you the fare to go to your good-for-nothing daughter?"

I couldn't get a word in edgewise. She rattled on like hailstones on a roof. There wasn't a thing she didn't blame me for: the new woman had ruined her linen, and the floors were a mess. She was ready to burst from bile. "So you're off to Yerevan, are you? Come up closer, wait till I get my hands on you, you ungrateful bitch!"

I had been silent until then, waiting for her to end her tirade. I knew that she felt wronged. But when she called me an "ungrateful bitch" my patience snapped.

"You're an ungrateful thing yourself! I don't need your money or your food. I wouldn't touch a crumb of anything you owned. I've come to say goodbye, not to borrow money." I was so mad I didn't care if Mikhak or anyone else heard me and paid no attention to his daughters, who were splitting their sides from laughing at me.

"What are you laughing at, you old maids? You're the ones who should be laughed at. You won't let a single man go by without making a pass at him. You're off to the railway station every day, waiting for your chance to latch on to somebody."

At this, they stopped laughing.

"Shut up! Don't you dare speak like that in my house or I'll have you arrested!" Mikhak roared, crashing his fist down on the table.

"What for?"

"For what you've said."

"Then why don't you have your wife arrested? What she said was worse."

"Shut up!"

"Chase her out, Papa! She's crazy. She went mad after they arrested her daughter."

"You're the ones who are crazy! Shameless hussies! I curse you all!"

I put on my shoes, picked up my bundles and left. I felt that a weight had been lifted from my heart. I was happy I had had my say. I recalled Victoria saying that the rich had no conscience, that they were good to you as long as you were useful to them and knew your place. That's exactly the way it turned out to be. I hung another padlock on my door and set out for the station. I saw Petre waiting for me in the crowd. He had on an overcoat and was carrying a lantern.

"Why are you late?"

"Something held me up." I didn't want to tell him about what had happened.

We went right into the car. Petre introduced me to the conductor.

"This is my second mother. I want you to take her to Yerevan. She's never been there before, so try to make her trip pleasant."

The conductor was a tall young man in a black coat with a whistle hanging round his neck. He laughed at Petre's words. "Don't worry. If the train stops I'll carry her there. Look at all the people in my car. Do you think I'll take them all to Yerevan and leave her behind?"

"I know you won't. But I want her trip to be pleasant. When you get there take her to Artush's house. Don't leave her alone. This is her first trip to a big city."

"All right."

The third bell rang, and the train pulled out of the station. It was stuffy inside the crowded car, with all the windows tightly shut. Most of the men were soldiers and volunteers.

They were going to Kars. There was heavy fighting going on there. They spoke of the war, of the high prices and the new paper money. And all of them complained about the war dragging on. There were hard times at home, and hunger, with the men away for several years now and no end to the war in sight.

My head ached from the cheap tobacco, and the smoke stung my eyes. I was sorry for these men, torn from their families and homes. Every last one of them must have had a wife and perhaps little children as well, and parents, too. I thought they must be smoking the strong tobacco to take their minds off their unhappy thoughts. The battlefields lay ahead. No matter which of them you asked: "Where are you going, son?", the answer would be: "To the front lines. To Kars."

"O, woe! Woe to all your mothers!" Looking at them, I thought of my own boy.

Thus did we roll along. The conductor, whose name was Sedrak, came and went, checking the tickets. Finally he sat down next to me and said, "How are you feeling? Do you like the train?"

All during the trip he talked and joked with me to keep me from being bored or worried. He was a fine young man. I had never met anyone like him before.

Early the next morning I untied my bundle of food and offered him two eggs, a drumstick and a flatcake.

"Here, Sedrak, I feel as if you were my own son."

"Thanks. But what will you give me when we reach Yerevan?" he said and laughed.

The soldiers got off at Alexandrople, but we stayed on for the remainder of the day, reaching Yerevan at midnight. The trains did not run on schedule in those days. They said there was a shortage of coal, and the roads were in need of repair. There were no lights on the platform in Yerevan, just a flickering wick in the waiting room. After all the passengers had left the car, Sedrak took me to Artush's house.

Artush was also a railwayman. He lived nearby in a stone house. His wife was Russian. He had two fair-haired, blue-eyed children. When he learned that I was Petre's friend

he couldn't do enough for me. I am very thankful to him and his wife.

When I awoke in the morning his wife had already started the samovar and set the table. I wanted to help her, but she wouldn't hear of it, saying, "No, Granny, you've had a long trip. Go back to sleep for a while."

But had I come to Yerevan to sleep? I yearned to see Victoria. Artush came in after I had dressed. His wife fried an omelette, and we had it with jam and sweet tea. During breakfast I told them about what had happened and then said, "What shall I do now, Artush? I must see Victoria."

"I think it can be arranged. We'll say that you've come from very far away and we'll ask for permission to see her."

After breakfast Artush and I left the house. He took my bundle and walked ahead. When we arrived at the prison we asked to see one of the prisoners. Luckily, this was a visiting day, and I was soon granted permission.

They asked whom I wanted to see, and I said, "My daughter Victoria Danelian."

The man summoned a warden and told him to bring over Victoria Danelian.

Artush and I were taken to another room. Soon I heard someone in the corridor, calling out: "Victoria Danelian!"

My heart was fluttering like a trapped bird. How would Victoria look? Was she well? Was her dress still fit to wear?

I was so taken up with these thoughts that I did not notice a girl in a man's jacket on the other side of the mesh screen. It was Victoria! Her face was pale and she had become very thin, but her eyes shone as brightly as ever, and her hair now reached to her shoulders. She came up close to the screen and stared at me for a moment. I could see she had not expected me to come all the way to Yerevan.

"Mamma!"

I had not heard her voice for six long months. The blood was pounding in my ears.

"Yes, dear, it's me." No matter how I tried, I couldn't keep back the tears.

"Don't cry, Mamma. That's not what you came here for. Tell me what's new. How have you been?"

We spoke about this and that and then I asked, "When will they let you out, Victoria? When will you come back home?"

"Soon, Mamma. They'll soon set us all free." She looked at the guard as she said this.

"Oh, then they've already reviewed your case!" I cried.

"We'll be freed without a trial. Our comrades will soon free us."

At this the guard shouted, "You're not supposed to talk about such things! Talk about something else, Miss."

I stayed on for a while longer. When we parted we agreed that I would return home the following day.

Back at Artush's house I discovered that the Turks had occupied Alexandropole and that the roads had been blocked.

And so I stayed on at Artush's house in Yerevan. I felt very guilty imposing on a poor family, but he said, "Don't even think about it. You're as a mother to us. We want you to feel at home. And don't worry about the food, either."

"Yes, everything will be all right," his wife added.

Several days passed. I was fretful, thinking about Victoria. Would they ever let her out? "There's not much longer to wait now," Artush said to comfort me.

There was a noticeable change in the city two days later. This was especially evident at the railway station. The workers would gather in groups, discussing something. I didn't know what was going on. When Artush came home he said, "Come on, we're going to the prison!"

"Why, Artush?"

"Our comrades will be freed today. Victoria, too."

"How come?"

"There's been a change of government. The government's in our hands now."

That's when I discovered that he, too, was a Bolshevik like my daughter.

We set out together. I can't begin to describe the jubilation in the streets. There was a crowd carrying banners outside the prison. One of the men had climbed a box and was addressing the prisoners leaving the jail.

"Comrades! You have been through much suffering and deprivation. . . ."

As he spoke I searched for Victoria. But how could I spot

her in such a crowd? She was nowhere to be seen. Then, when the speaker was through, I saw Victoria, still in the same man's jacket, climb the box and say: "That which we have all waited for so long has finally come to be!"

She spoke for some time, and I wept through her whole speech. But these were tears of joy. When she ended I made my way through to her.

"Victoria!" I cried, grabbing her hand.

"Mamma!"

"My darling ... I...." We embraced and kissed, but still I could not stop my tears.

* * *

Victoria now settled in Yerevan. I stayed with her for a month and a half, for the Turks had occupied Alexandropole, and I could not go back home. I was restless in Yerevan. In the first place, it was a strange city; and then, I kept worrying about the house. What if something had happened? What if we had been robbed? We had our meals in a cafe, then Victoria would be off to work, and I would remain in our room, thinking and worrying about home. I kept waiting for news of the trains running again.

One day towards the end of January we heard that a train was leaving for Tiflis and that a commissar was going to be on it. Victoria spoke to someone, and I was put on the train. I arrived home in the middle of winter. The frost was so bitter that everyone in the railway car was chilled to the bone. I met Petre at the station.

"Hello, Mother!" he shouted.

"God bless you, Petre."

"Tell me about your trip. How is Comrade Victoria?"

He wanted to know all the details. I told him about my stay and gave him Victoria's regards. She especially wanted to be remembered to him for his kindness towards me. Then I remarked on the red bow tacked to his lapel.

"Are you a Bolshevik, too, Petre?"

"Yes. Comrade Victoria recruited me."

So that's how it was. That's why he had spoken so highly of Victoria and been so good to me.

He called a cab and got me settled inside with my bun-

dies. On the way I kept wondering about how things were at home.

My neighbours were no longer surprised to see me riding up in a cab. Liza was standing at the gate. At the sight of me she began chattering gaily: "Anna! How good it is to see you back! We were hoping that nothing had happened to you, that you were well and had not fallen ill on the way."

I said nothing.

"We practically got eye-strain watching the road for you. We were so worried," she continued. Then she invited me upstairs for a cup of tea. "Come, come! I know you're tired and chilled from the trip. A hot cup of tea will warm you up. The samovar is still hot."

We entered the yard. Mikhak came towards us.

"Is that you, Anna? I can't believe my eyes. I kept wondering what on earth had happened to you." He, too, invited me in for tea. "Come on up, you must be frozen. Do come up."

But I didn't say a word to him, either. I started down to my own room slowly. He called after me, "Wait! Can't you hear me? Come and have some tea with us."

I thanked him and continued on downstairs. A new padlock was hanging on the door. I felt as if someone had struck me. My knees began to tremble. I couldn't move. So someone had broken in and robbed us after all! That's why they had been coaxing me to have a cup of tea with them, they wanted to prepare me for the shock.

"What's this? Whose lock is this?"

"Come on up. It's our lock. And we have the key to it," Liza said.

"What happened? Did someone break in?"

"No. Come on upstairs. We'll tell you all about it."

"What for? Give me the key, and I'll see what the damage is."

"There is no damage. Don't worry. We're not your enemies. We would never let anyone rob you!" Liza said, trying to be friendly. "Come on, we'll have some tea and I'll tell you all about it."

Six weeks before she had practically thrown me out of her house. What had happened to have made them change so? I gave in and went upstairs. I was dumbfounded at the

sight of their living room. Where were the rugs, the drapes, the tablecloths? Everything was gone. The glass-doored cupboard was empty. There were several old chairs in the room and a plain cloth thrown over the couch. It really looked as if they had been robbed. And the two of them were dressed in shabby clothes instead of their former finery.

Their daughters came in from an adjoining room.

"Hello, Anna! How'd you like Yerevan?"

"Not bad. It's a city like any other."

They both had on old dresses. And their former arrogance was gone. Something very serious had happened. They had either been robbed or else the Bolsheviks had confiscated their valuables.

"What's happened? Where are all your things?" I asked.

"In the cellar," Liza said.

So they were afraid of the Bolsheviks!

"Why did you take off my lock?"

"Don't worry about that. Our lock is bigger and better."

"Give me the key, then. I'll go and have a look at my things. I'll bet the rats ate them."

"There's no need to worry about rats. We have a cat down there now."

"My goodness! What if it breaks my dishes?"

"It won't. We've put everything safely away," Liza said.

"Where?"

"In the chest."

"What chest? I don't have a chest."

"We put it in ours."

"Why is your chest in my room? How did it get there?"

"We put it there."

"Why?"

"Others might have taken it. We thought our poor Anna deserved a chance to make use of it more than anyone else," Liza said.

"There are other things there, too, Anna. You can use them, too," her daughters said.

"Of course! It would be better if our Anna had the use of them," Mikhak added.

This was too much for me.

"I can't understand a thing. Please give me the key. I want to see what you've done while I was away."

"We'll go down together," Liza said. "It's a special kind of lock, you'll never be able to open it."

When she opened the door I couldn't believe my eyes.

It was my room, but you'd never know it.

There was a sideboard full of dishes. One of their rugs was thrown over my couch, the other was on the floor. Their white cat strutted towards us, meowing. Their fine chairs lined the walls, their round table was in the centre of the room, covered with a heavy cloth. My table had been moved into a corner. Their folded drapes were now stacked on it. The walls were hung with their paintings in heavy bronze frames. I didn't recognise my room, for it now looked like a room in a rich man's house. Their shiny nickel-plated samovar occupied another corner, and a large trunk stood by the brick oven. I wanted to look inside, but it was locked.

"What's in here?"

"That's our linen. You can use the other things, Anna, but don't touch the trunk. Your daughter's a Bolshevik, and they won't bother you."

It was all too clear.

"No, thank you. I don't need all this stuff. I'm satisfied with what I have. So you'd better start moving it out again."

"Let the things stay here for a while. You can use whatever you want," Mikhak said, and Liza nodded.

"I don't need them. I don't need anybody's things. Take them out!"

They began to plead with me, but I would have none of it. Then the whole family, father, mother and daughters, began lugging their possessions upstairs. If this were in former times, not one of them would have lifted a finger. You should have seen them at it, they were so quick about their work it was a wonder.

"As if our things would have been in your way," they muttered, but never stopped working.

When they were done I swept the room and sat down to rest.

I stayed on in town for two more months. Then I received a letter from Victoria, asking me to come and live with her in Yerevan. I got all my things together, sold some and took the rest along to Yerevan.

Two years have passed since then. My daughter works and supports me. I don't do washing for anyone any more.

Now I devote all my time to caring for Victoria, cooking for her and keeping house.

Victoria still goes to meetings. Sometimes she goes off to the villages to organise the women and teach them to read and write.

I'll never have to listen to the reproaches of Liza and her husband again. No one will ever shout at me, ordering me to shine their shoes, sweep their rooms or wash their floors. Even though I lost my boy, I still have Victoria. I'll never want for anything again.

And that's my story.

Suren Aivazian

ON THE MOUNTAIN

There were bursts of joyous laughter coming from outside, and the sound of a ringing young voice. There was the clanging of trolley cars, the noise of traffic.

In the study a man was poring over a cuneiform tablet. The windows were wide open. A soft breeze ruffled his grey hair and rustled the papers, but the scholar was oblivious to the breeze and the street noises.

But perhaps this story should be told another way?

For there would have been no joyous laughter, no young, vibrant voice and no scholar reading a cuneiform tablet if not for....

Yes, I believe the story should be told differently.

* « * *

The faint flame of the oil wick produced but a small glow in the darkness, barely outlining the young woman's face. She was seated cross-legged on the floor; one could visualise the hand rocking the cradle. A man with a black moustache was seated opposite. In the dim light his moustache seemed blacker and bushier than it was. His worried, sunken eyes were fixed on the flickering flame.

As if in unison with the flame, a sickle glittered in the corner. It seemed that it, and not the oil wick, illuminated the bottom of the basket lying on the floor, the trough that was leaned against a wall and the edge of a huge pitcher with a crimson border. The cradle creaked rhythmically in the stillness, and the empty pitcher in the corner echoed the sound in a hollow voice. The thousand-year-old walls of the room hewn in the cliff were staunch guardians of the silence.

Meanwhile, outside....

In the distance there was rapid firing that awakened an echo in the canyons and tore through the black night with bright flashes. The lights in the dwellings had long since been extinguished, but one window still looked out upon the darkness with a bright, surprised eye. This was Dashnak¹ headquarters. The advance units of the 11th Army of the Red forces had reached the left bank of the Agara; the next blow would smash the last stand which the Dashnaks called Mountainous Armenia.

In the foyer of the Dashnak headquarters Lt. Gulambarov had knocked down and was whipping a peasant. The man did not utter a sound, enraging the lieutenant by his stony silence, causing the blows to become ever fiercer as the lieutenant rasped: "So you don't want to fight the Communists? So you say you're sick, do you?"

Inside, Captain Enoch Agamian, the chief of staff, placed one foot in its patent-leather boot on a chair, leaned his elbow on his knee and, fingering his new Mauser revolver, bellowed into the phone: "I said how many men have you sent against the Reds? Shut up, you idiot!" He flung his gun onto the table and twirled his fair moustache. "What? Don't think you can get away with anything! Lt. Gulambarov will be there in an hour. I'll tell him to slit your belly if he finds a single able-bodied man!"

He slammed down the receiver and immediately picked it up again.

"Is this the switchboard? Get me Khanatsakh. That you, Barkhudar? Have you sent off the transport? What?!" Enoch grabbed his gun and waved it at the phone, as if he were threatening the man. "Are you mad? What do you mean 'it's impossible'? Are you just sitting there, waiting for the Bolsheviks? Listen to me, you're asking for trouble. The Bolsheviks won't shoot you, I will! D'you hear me? I'll take care of you myself. Send ten wagons of provisions out to us before dawn. And another thing: shoot the poor peasants. The rich ones will be glad to bring us all they have. That's all!"

He put the receiver back and began twirling his moustache thoughtfully, puffing out his pale cheeks which had never known the touch of mountain wind or mountain sun.

¹ *Dashnaks*—an Armenian bourgeois-nationalist, counter-revolutionary party.

The phone rang. Enoch picked up the receiver.

"There is the chief of staff speaking. Yes, General," he said in his deepest, most reverent voice. He removed his foot from the chair and drew up to attention. "Your Excellency, I can now report that our glorious troops have destroyed the band of partisans that tried to attack our right flank. Yes_____A great many peasants in Sarnakhbiur, Khanatsakh and other villages have volunteered to fight the Reds. What did you say, Sir? Supplies are being delivered on schedule in my section, Sir. The peasants are ready to part with all they own to see the accursed enemy destroyed."

The captain brought his foot up on the chair unthinkingly, but immediately removed it and straightened up again.

"Yes, Your Excellency!"

He replaced the receiver gingerly, as if afraid it might shatter. Then, rocking back and forth on his heels, he said to himself: "That was a whopper, Enoch! But what could I have said? The dog would have had me shot. Those Red bastards have turned the whole world upside-down!"

"Captain, Sir!" Gulambarov shouted, rushing in. He was waving his whip and panting like a winded horse. "They're coming!"

Enoch threw himself on the bed, burying his head in the pillow. If only he could find oblivion, never to know that the Bolsheviks were already at the Agara, that the peasants were full of hatred, that they refused to support the Dashnaks, that he had lied to his general and that his kind of Armenia would be no more. ... Then he jumped to his feet. "What do you mean by that?"

Gulambarov said nothing. He gaped and shifted his weight.

The peasant moaned on the floor in the foyer. Then he raised his head and listened to the voices coming from behind the door.

The flame in the oil lamp petered out. The basket and the trough disappeared in the darkness, though the sickle still shone dully in the corner. The crimson border on the pitcher disappeared, but the pitcher itself echoed as before the sound of human voices.

"I'll be going, Nazan."

The man's heavy hand came to rest on the cradle's edge, on top of the woman's soft hand.

"It's the middle of the night. Where are you going, Stepanr

"I want to see if what they're saying about the Bolsheviks defending people like us is true."

In the absolute blackness of the room Stepan got his rifle from its hiding place where the pitcher hummed.

Nazan grabbed his hand and cried out in fear. The child awoke with a loud wail. Stepan moved his wife aside and dropped to his knees beside the cradle. He asked Nazan to light the wick for him again and gently turned back the cover, gazing fondly at his year-old son.

"David," he whispered as he stroked the child's soft, warm chin with his tiller's coarse finger. "I'm going for your sake, son. If the Bolsheviks really are good people and just, you'll have a fine life ahead of you. Then it won't really matter if I don't come back alive."

He kissed the child's hand and headed out of the room.

"Stepan!" Nazan called anxiously, peering into the night from the stone threshold where she stood in her bare feet.

"I'll be back!" the darkness called out in Stepan's voice. His departing steps became fainter and fainter.

Nazan stood there for some time, bewildered and frightened. She listened to the far-off, hollow shots that thundered in the canyons and, magnified by the echoes of the mountains, seemed to be ripping asunder the blackness of the damp night. Everything around her was filled with a black, damp fear. The abandoned child screamed loudly in the room.

At the crack of dawn the Red Army men launched another attack, only to be thrown back again. The Dashnaks held the mountain heights, and from there they had the canyon under cross-fire. There was no other road to the Agara Valley. For the past eleven days the Red Army units had been trying in vain to fight their way through.

It was a sunny June morning. The cliffs of Agara Gorge were veiled by a blue mist. Suddenly the top of Eagle Mountain caught the first pink rays of the sun.

Stepan was lying in the grass on Eagle Mountain. The entire mountain range was spread out beneath him. Machine-guns were rattling on the left bank.

The thunder of a cannon drowned out the shooting. The Dashnaks had no heavy guns and returned the artillery fire with machine-gun fire.

The sun rose higher still, as if flooding the edge of the valley between the cliffs with golden honey. That's where the Red trenches were. As Stepan gazed at the sun-drenched, blossoming valley he thought about the Communists.

The Dashnaks' positions were also clearly visible from where he lay, but he did not want to think about them. Stepan knew them only too well. A Dashnak in a grey sheepskin hat got behind a machine-gun, and it began to cough a steady stream of fire. It kept the Red Army men in the trenches, preventing them from launching another attack. The Communists fired their big gun at the peaks; the canyons shuddered and echoed like the big empty pitcher in his room; everything was enveloped in clouds of rust-coloured dust. When the dust settled the untouched positions of the Dashnaks came into view again, and once again the machine-gun began coughing viciously, keeping the men down.

"David's life and future are down there in that green sunny valley. Down on the left bank," Stepan was saying to himself. "That means the Dashnaks are firing at my boy, too."

He placed his sheepskin hat under his rifle and took careful aim. Then he held his breath, waiting for the cannon to roar so that the Dashnaks would not hear the sound of his shot.

The cannon roared, and Stepan fired. The Dashnak in the grey sheepskin hat fell heavily on the machine-gun.

Tarkhan, the Dashnaks' commander, rode by, inspecting his positions, encouraging the men. He pulled his horse up sharply beside the machine-gun and dismounted. The horse threw back its head and whinnied, as if sensing danger. Tarkhan pressed his revolver to his side as he bent over the dead man. He straightened up with a jerk and turned around, raising his field-glasses to his eyes, scanning the mountain tops. He knew that the machine-gunner had been shot from behind.

Stepan pressed his chin into his interlaced fingers and watched the Red Army men jumping out of their trenches and rushing towards the gorge. A machine-gun rattled in

the distance, and the one that had been silenced began coughing fire again.

This time Stepan did not wait for the cannon to roar. He fired, and the machine-gun choked and was silent.

Tarkhan's glasses were focussed on Eagle Mountain. Stepan hesitated for a moment and then fired again, this time at the Dashnak commander. He cursed softly for having missed. The Dashnaks spotted him and opened fire from all sides. A thud in his shoulder sent a sharp pain through his body.

The canyon resounded with the battle cry of the men in green army shirts who had broken through to the mountain valley and were running with a red banner, the colour of the sun rising over the mountains, billowing above them.

Stepan's strength was ebbing. He could hear the distant shooting as in a dream and the battle cry, repeated by the mountains.... Everything was becoming dim. Blood slowly darkened the grass on Eagle Mountain, tinting it the colour of the rising sun.

"Hello! Hello! Is this the switchboard?" the captain belowed into the phone, blowing into the receiver and finally slamming it down again. "The line's been cut!" He turned to Gulambarov who stood close by, still holding on to his whip, and the whip twitched like a nervous dog's tail.

"What's happened?" the lieutenant asked, if only to say something.

The captain brushed him aside.

"They're coming! The Reds are coming!" someone shouted ecstatically outside the window, and the words tore at Enoch's heart.

"That's grand, isn't it," Enoch muttered and rushed outside where his saddled horse awaited him. He put his foot in the stirrup, but had no chance to mount, for Gulambarov fired a shot at him. Enoch spun round, he tried to raise his revolver, glaring at the lieutenant indignantly, but a film covered his eyes and the earth suddenly lurched at him.

Gulambarov galloped down the village street on his commander's horse. Suddenly a shot rang out. The riderless horse turned back. A peasant carrying a rifle tried to catch the horse but he was no match for it, not with his body aching from Gulambarov's whip.

Red Army troops entered the village. They were dusty and tired, but happy. A crowd of men, women and children formed around them. They embraced the soldiers, shook their hands, and the women offered them pitchers of cold milk.

Barefooted Nazan stood on the threshold of her stone room, her son on her arm, searching the faces of the Red Army men anxiously for sight of her own Stepan.

The black sky was studded with stars. There were stars on high and stars far below. Stepan could not understand where he was. Where were this black sky and these cold stars? He tried to get his bearings, but felt his leaden lids closing. He sensed that if he let them close now it would be forever. He could not move his right arm. There was no feeling in it. With his left hand Stepan scooped up some cold dew and brought it to his parched lips and burning forehead and eyes. He gazed up into the endless blackness, where innumerable fires burned whitely but were unable to dispel the darkness of the night. Everything was gradually becoming blacker and darker, the white fires were dying down; now they flickered and became little yellow lights, like the oil lamps in the cliff dwellings. Stepan felt that he was no longer on Eagle Mountain, but back home. Through the open door he could see the lights of his hamlet. There were yellow flickering flames in every home, and in this flickering there was anxiety and an unknown fear. He was waiting for David's loud wail, for Nazan's sweet, familiar sigh as she awoke and then for the rhythmic rocking of the cradle.

The yellow fire-flies dimmed and went out one by one as his heavy lids drew closer together. Once again Stepan scooped up the dew and moistened his burning forehead and parched lips. His head cleared. Now the fires in the night burned brightly once again. Stepan suddenly realised that these were stars, for he was on the very top of the mountain. He tried to recall and did: his rifle, the shot he had fired to stop the machine-gun that was coughing death upon the sunny green valley; his second shot that had silenced the machine-gun again; and the Red Army men jumping out of their trenches and rushing into the gorge. Then he had fired again, this time at the Dashnak commander, but he had missed. The Red Army men had reached the valley. They

were running in an extended line with their mighty red banner blazing in the sun.

"If only they're ... just ... and kind.... Then my boy will be happy...

But once again his heavy eyelids closed. His parched lips were aflame from thirst, and his heart was on fire.

Blood still dripped from his lifeless arm, moistening the mountain grass and the night-blooming flowers. Stepan sank helplessly into the vast, inky night.

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There were bursts of joyous laughter coming from outside and the sound of a young, ringing voice. There was the clanging of trolley cars, the noise of traffic.

In the study a middle-aged scholar was poring over a cuneiform tablet. A breeze wafted in through the open windows and ruffled his ash-grey hair, rustling his papers. The scholar did not hear the street noises, nor did he feel the breeze. He was lost in the far distant past, in times when there were no automobiles and man could only dream of flying, when cities were surrounded by fortresses with cuneiform characters hewn into the bricks of the walls. He was trying so hard to decipher the meaning of these characters that small beads of sweat appeared on his high forehead.

Week after week passed. His cigarettes turned into mounds of ash, there were now strands of white in his grey hair. But he would not give in. He would tear the secret from this stubborn relic of the past!

The door of his study flew open, and a boy rushed in, shouting, "Papa!"

The scholar raised his head, for the young, vibrant voice brought him back to the present.

"Come over here, Stepan," his father said and put an arm around his shoulders.

"Why do you spend so much time looking at those old stones, Papa?"

"Well, because I want you to know more about your ancestors and what they did, and how they lived."

The boy smiled and bent over the tablets. His father leaned back in his chair. Once again the street noises faded. Pie gazed at his hand thoughtfully as it lay on the arm of the

chair. There was something of old age that had appeared in it lately. He recalled his youth, and wondered again about the father he had never known. His father had not left a single trace upon this earth. Not even a snapshot of himself. His mother had told him that his father had taken his rifle from its hiding place one black night and had left home, saying, "I'll be back!" But he had never returned.

The scholar would never learn this secret. He would never know that his father's remains lay on the inaccessible peak of Eagle Mountain. He would never know that his father's bravery and death had made it possible for him to have a chance in life, to become a scholar who could delve both into the past and into the future.

COMRADE MUKUCH

1

Everything changed; Mukuch alone did not change.

For the past ten years he had served as a watchman at the tannery. During this time the regime had changed twice, and five managers had been replaced at the tannery. And yet, none of this had any visible effect on Mukuch. No matter whom you asked, the answer would be the same: Mukuch was at his usual post, dressed in the same rags as always.

Each new manager noticed Mukuch the first day he arrived, when he was on his first round of inspection. And each time, having done with the official part of his new job, the new manager would address Mukuch in a significant tone of voice, saying, "You might as well stay on until further notice."

Further notice was never forthcoming, and so Mukuch, who didn't quite grasp the meaning of the words anyway, would stay on at the job. Then he would be completely forgotten or, rather, his presence would no longer be noticed. In a few weeks the new manager would become so used to the sight of him that he would begin to consider Mukuch a factory fixture.

Mukuch's appearance was just as fixed. He was a man of forty-odd years, of an age when people seem to remain unchanged for a long period of time. His coarse face with its broad nose and heavy beard seemed swollen. Only an observant person would notice the expression of constant concern and sadness in his large, motionless eyes.

Summer and winter Mukuch wore the same grey clothes. His jacket had been made over from an army greatcoat that had lost its original colour from age, and he wore so many tattered garments under it that he resembled a shapeless¹

sack from afar. His tattered black sheepskin hat seemed to have sprouted from his head, becoming a part of his hair.

However, his shoes were the most remarkable aspect of his appearance. At one time they had been a pair of army boots which, having served their term, had come down to Mukuch. There were so many patches on them that it was impossible to discover their original shape. The patches were held in place with bits of string, nails or wire.

It should be noted that each manager in turn would notice the ambiguous situation his very first day on the job: the tannery watchman wore shoes that were beyond description. And each in turn would sign an order for a piece of leather for a pair of shoes to be issued to him. However, Mukuch would trade the leather for flour, while he continued wearing his old shoes.

To tell the truth, Mukuch wasn't too disappointed. He knew for a fact that even if he ordered himself a new pair of shoes they would eventually wear out, as shoes usually do, while his old ones, and he was certain of this, would last forever.

2

Anyone who came upon Mukuch for the first time would say he was a refugee. And if you asked him he would say that in his childhood he and his father had moved to such-and-such village and from there to another, and to a third, and so on. Still, no one could say where this wandering Armenian had come from.

Mukuch's resemblance to a refugee was heightened by the fact that all his possessions consisted of a bed of rags and an old copper pot, both of which he could take along on all his wanderings. This did not bother Mukuch either, for he lived at a time when most of the Armenian people were considered refugees.

"As long as there's bread, nothing else matters," he was wont to say.

Mukuch, his wife and four children settled down in a ramshackle house near the tannery. If not for these unexpected residents, the house would never have seen a human face again. The roof over the right balcony had settled at

such a crazy angle that it seemed ready to topple at any moment.

The children, the eldest of whom was seven, whimpered and whined all day long, and their whining sounded like kittens miaowing. Mukuch had long since become accustomed to this strange sound. It meant: "We're hungry! Give us some bread!"

That was why, each time the regime changed, the most pressing question, to Mukuch's mind, was the question of bread. He would ask various people throughout the day: "Is it true? They say that bread will be cheaper now."

Who had said that? Where had it been said? Actually, no one had said anything. It was simply Mukuch's fervent hopes that had prompted him to spread the news.

When Mukuch was given the job of delivering bread to the factory during the first year of Soviet power the excitement made him talkative. One would think all the rationed bread was for him. There was not a person he did not stop to tell, "I'll be delivering bread to the workers now."

With what ardour he set about the job! He raced back and forth from the food depot to the factory carrying a large sack of bread over his shoulder. The closeness of the bread and its heady aroma were so tantalising that he would press his face against the sack and breathe it in. He dreamed that one day they would hand him one of the large loaves and say, "Here, Mukuch, take it!"

However, when the rations were handed out and the sack was empty again his sweet dreams would vanish. Very little of the strictly rationed bread reached his stomach.

On the days when the bakery was late and Mukuch was forced to wait for hours on end for the bread at the food depot, his heart would falter. It seemed to him then that someone would come out and say, "There's no more bread. There's no use waiting."

But then he would say to himself that both the tannery workers and the management got their rations here. And, naturally, no one would ever dare to leave the management without bread. If everyone was poor like himself, there'd be no hope, but since the manager and other important people were on the factory staff, they simply couldn't stop rationing out bread to them.

Mukuch would come home several times during the day.

Each time both he and his wife were puzzled: his hungry stomach would lead him to believe that perhaps his wife had cooked up something from vegetables, while she, in turn, hoped that her husband had somehow managed to get them some bread.

Disappointment would loosen the tongue of his irritable wife, and she would begin her daily harangue, "So you've come home, have you? That's a nice how d'you do! He comes crashing in here empty-handed as if he didn't know he had a family!"

Her voice would rise higher and higher and then turn into a buzzing in his ears. Despite his being a patient man, he would shout: "There you go again! That's enough!" He would hurry out, with his wife's voice trailing curses at him all the way back to the factory.

3

The advent of Soviet power stirred and excited everyone. Some rejoiced, while others, who had lost their riches and social standing, cursed it.

The excitement of the first days of a new government, the inspired speeches and the people marching with red banners caught Mukuch up. He joined several marches and attended several meetings. He would stand in the last row, listening intently. At times he felt he understood everything that was being said, for they were speaking about the rights of poor people like him.

Several days passed. Then the lack of bread once again began to torment him. His thoughts became confused. The speeches he had heard seemed incomprehensible.

During the first days of the new government the old question surfaced again, and Mukuch never missed an opportunity to say, "Is it true? They say they're going to increase the bread ration."

Who had said that? Whom had it been said to? It was a mystery, as before.

Mukuch considered all else that had nothing to do with bread, the talk and the speeches, idle chatter which those inhabitants whom he termed the "higher-ups" could enjoy as a diversion after a good meal.

To him "higher-ups" were people who wore city clothes and "could tell black from white". He bunched the Soviet office personnel with the above. Despite the fact that they received their bread and food rations and their salaries in his presence, Mukuch was certain that they all received extra rations some place else.

"Poor people can go without eating, but the higher-ups aren't hardened to starving," Mukuch would say to himself.

From childhood on Mukuch had become accustomed to the ways of the world, and these old concepts were as firmly entrenched in his head as a wild nut is in its shell: no matter how hard you strike it, you'll never reach the kernel.

4

Yet how this world had changed! There was a lot that Mukuch saw for himself, and a lot that he heard about. Those who had been at the top were now at the bottom, while those now at the top had come from the bottom. However, Mukuch had his own opinion about everything.

"There's no question about it," he said to himself. "It's good to hear everyone calling each other 'comrade'." It was a word to his liking. But why then did everyone persist in calling him just plain old Mukuch? Anyone at all felt it quite proper to address him thus: "How are things, Mukuch?"

Naturally, he wasn't complaining, for everyone at the factory was good to him, but since that was the new way of things, he, too, should be called "comrade". Mukuch was offended.

Then again, why was the factory barber always trying to brush him off? Whenever he'd go to the barbershop for a haircut he'd hear the same thing: "Why don't you come by later on, Mukuch? I'll have more time after I see to all these people."

He had forgotten how many times he had stopped by, only to hear the same words. Finally, he became thoroughly disgusted and had stopped going there. His beard, which now resembled a broom, covered half his face.

Mukuch knew only too well that the barber didn't want to bother with him. But Mukuch wasn't blind. He knew that the

thief of a barber was exchanging his old, worn razors for newly-issued ones. He was stealing the cloth issued to him for towels and smocks, and this at a time when everything was so dear. As if Mukuch didn't know that the slack-mouthed thief had taken the job at the factory barbershop to make some quick money and then open a place of his own.

Though Mukuch knew all this, he said nothing, for he wasn't looking for trouble. But if he were given the chance to judge him, he knew what he'd do with that brazen thief who had insulted him so!

It was obvious that Mukuch would see none of the good things they were talking about if people like the barber got their fingers in the pie. Mukuch was a poor man, and he would remain so. Nothing had changed in the state of the world.

Actually, everything was changing except Mukuch.

5

Mukuch had the devil's own luck!

A new manager now took over. He was a short, skinny, bespectacled, stubborn man. Unlike the other managers, he always noticed Mukuch and reprimanded him for one thing or another every single day. He kept rushing about, peering in every nook and cranny. Mukuch couldn't understand what his policy was. He was so much at a loss that he didn't even know what to do to get in the man's good favour. After a solid month of this Mukuch became desperate. He thought that the manager had decided to fire him and was simply looking for an excuse.

However, the all-patient Mukuch would have weathered this trial as well, if not for the misfortune that befell him. One morning some leather was found to have been stolen from the shed. There is no need to describe the state Mukuch was in. The manager kept questioning him all through the day. Then he was taken to the militia, where he was questioned again. Each time the manager said, "You're the watchman. That means you're to blame."

As if that were not enough, his wife got after him. "Who ever heard of an innocent man being insulted so and his family ruined! Isn't there anyone to defend us, to protect

us from this misfortune! Can't they see it's all a put-up job, a dirty trick?"

"What are you shouting about?" Mukuch said, trying in his own, masculine way to console her. "Think about me. How do you think I feel?"

But his wife continued to bemoan their fate. She couldn't control herself, she wept, she called in the neighbours, and the children, seeing her thus, were terrified and wailed at the tops of their voices.

Twilight was falling. Mukuch's heart was also sunk in gloom.

He entered the damp, windowless shed built into the factory fence, sat down on a rock and stared at the ground.

"Well, this is the end of me," he thought. "They're sure to arrest me. They're not going to spare me. And who'll defend me? All right, say they do arrest me. But what will happen to the children? Who could have stolen the accursed leather? To tell the truth, the only one who could have done it was that scoundrel of a barber. I sure have luck! See what things have come to: a faithless man like him has the manager listening to his lies. I know it's him who pointed the finger at me and said I stole the goods."

Day was turning into night, and Mukuch's heart was becoming just as dark.

Suddenly he heard a voice beside him, saying: "Where are you, Mukuch?"

Mukuch rose and felt his way out of the shed.

It was Margar, one of the workers. "Where were you, Mukuch? I've been looking for you for an hour. Come on."

Mukuch followed him in silence.

6

"Now they've thought up something else," Mukuch decided. As luck would have it, Margar sat him down in the front row. Margar obviously wanted to fix things so that everyone could see him and disgrace him.

How many people there were! And all of them were angry. If only he could have suddenly died or dropped through the ground instead of becoming the laughing-stock for all of them.

A large table with a red cloth on it was placed on the stage. There were six people sitting at the table. He knew all of them, but they looked like strangers now. If only someone were to say to them, "What has Mukuch ever done to you to make you look at him so hatefully?"

He was both frightened and ashamed. Mukuch felt he was in hell. It was a warm spring evening outside, but he was chilled to the bone.

The workers sitting next to him spoke to him, they tried to cheer him up, but he didn't hear their words. His thoughts were miles away.

This was it. It was the end of him. What could he do to protect himself from so many people, all of whom spoke with such ease and were so learned? Naturally, they were going to defend the manager. After all, he was a higher-up, not a simple man like Mukuch. Look at him sitting there, scowling from under his glasses.

And what could Mukuch say? For instance, "I'm a poor man, and how do I know who stole it? I don't know nothing. I swear by all that's holy that I don't know nothing about it." Mukuch's eyes came to rest on a large portrait of Lenin on the wall.

"They say he's a good man. If only he was here now and could help me, I wouldn't be in such a mess."

A bell tinkled, bringing the meeting to order. People were getting up to speak, but Mukuch didn't follow their words. He came to with a start when a worker named Saak began to speak. Saak had a loud voice and his words were easy to understand. How angry he was today. It seemed that he was breathing fire. Naturally, he was angry at Mukuch. How strange, though: Saak had just said, "Comrade Mukuch". If he was angry at him, why did he call him "Comrade Mukuch"? That was a term of respect.

Moreover, the manager was on pins and needles all during Saak's speech. He kept jumping to his feet, raising his hand to reply, and finally stalked out, red in the face, and muttering to himself before Saak was even through speaking.

Everyone watched him go. Sergo, a worker who sat next to Mukuch, whispered, "Did you see them scare the manager, Mukuch?"

Mukuch was too confused to reply.

Things were taking an unexpected turn. Now again some-

one had referred to him as "Comrade Mukuch". Yes, they were praising him. "Despite the hunger and cold, Mukuch is always on the job, like a soldier at his post. ... If the manager were a good man, he'd have at least asked Mukuch where he sleeps at night and how things are at home."

No, there could be no doubt about it. They were all helping him, they were defending him! The chains that bound his heart burst. He had been frozen when he had entered the building, but now he felt warm all over.

He looked about excitedly, listening to each new speaker with bated breath. Strangely, he understood all that was being said. He wanted to rise from his seat and pour forth everything that had pressed upon his heart.

All of a sudden Margar tugged at his sleeve.

"The next speaker is Comrade Mukuch," the chairman repeated.

"Tell them everything," Margar whispered.

Mukuch rose to his feet in confusion. He was silent for some moments, gathering up his courage, and then began softly, in a hoarse voice. Everyone was quiet. They were listening intently.

"Comrades, even though I'm a poor man, I'll never sell my honour. I don't know anything about this theft. All I can say is that I'm the victim. I want to ask you and your conscience to help me."

He breathed heavily as he spoke. The chairman said another few words, then two more people spoke briefly and the meeting was adjourned.

The workers surrounded him.

"Don't worry, Comrade Mukuch, we won't let you down!"

They were speaking to him, slapping him on the back, and each one was calling him "comrade".

Mukuch went out into the street. His emotions were in such a turmoil that he didn't know whether he was coming or going. He couldn't decide whether to rush right home or to stay on at the tannery. How many persons had stood up to defend him! And how had he never realised it would be so? It seemed as if a thousand voices were all speaking in unison, saying, "Comrade Mukuch".

Mukuch's heart was so full he even forgot his ever-present thoughts about bread. If he had to give up his life now, he would gladly do so.

Three years passed before I returned to my native city again.

One evening I attended a workers' meeting. As I listened to the speakers my eyes roamed over the tight rows, and I involuntarily compared all this with the recent past. What a change had been wrought!

After the third speaker had sat down I heard Chairman Saak's voice saying, "The next speaker is Comrade Mukuch."

A clean-shaven worker with a neat haircut appeared on the stage. He stood there silently for a few moments, feeling a bit awkward, and then began to speak in that emotional voice that is peculiar to workers in love with the Revolution. "Comrades, our enemies have had us surrounded for many years, and now they want to strangle us. They tried to strangle us through starvation, but nothing came of that. They tried to do it by force, and nothing came of that. It's about time our enemies realised that those times are over. We've begun to understand what things are about now. Our eyes have been opened. And now we're not afraid of anything." The hall was rocked by applause.

I thought I recognised the speaker's face. I was just about to ask the worker sitting next to me who it was when he said, "Do you know who that is? That's our Mukuch."

"No! Where are his historic shoes and shaggy beard?"

Margar laughed. "He's cast his old-regime clothes away.

We sent his shoes and bread-sack to a museum. And his beard, as you see, fell a victim to a razor blade. If not for his wife, he would have shaved off his moustache as well."

"How did that case about the stolen leather end?"

"You don't imagine we'd have let anyone hurt our Mukuch, do you?"

I was more than astonished to see Mukuch, clean-shaven, wearing new shoes, new clothes and, most amazing of all, speaking from the podium! It was hard to believe I wasn't dreaming.

I walked home, lost in thought. I was recalling the past. I was thinking about what had happened to our famous Mukuch, a living monument, a fixture in my native city. And as I walked along, thinking of the past, Saak's voice rang in my ears: "The next speaker is Comrade Mukuch."

THIRST

Slowly he raised his lids and looked about with clear eyes, though he was not fully conscious yet. He had no sensation in his body, he did not hear the constant explosions coming from the depths of the pine forest. That day a glittering film of ice as clear as glass covered the surface of the cold water; the dry grasses in the fields, the sunflower stalks and the leaves on the trees were all covered with hoarfrost. This was the first breath of approaching winter.

A ray of sunshine hit his eyes, and a faint pain pricked his temples and the back of his head. Slowly, from the uncertainty of oblivion, his surroundings began to take shape, becoming real. Here was a house with a pointed roof, steam was rising from a nearby hill like the warm breath of a living creature, and there were a few trees. But why were the leaves white? His hearing awakened, too, catching first a far-off thunder in the stillness, and then, closer, very close by, the cry of a magpie.

Unthinkingly, he tried to rise but immediately collapsed, like a rotted, tattered roof. He felt as if all his bones were breaking with a loud cracking sound. It was some consolation for it meant his mind was working, and he was alive.

His mind continued to revive. He recalled that his name was Mikael. His name rang in his ears. He could even hear it in the forest noises.

The shadows were lifting. It was beginning to get light. The sun was rising. It seemed that it could not take its insistent gaze from him. He could now feel his own body, his sense of time and his surroundings had returned. Now the thunder of the big guns and the rattle of machine-guns could be heard more clearly, coming ever closer.

How long had he lain there? How many hours had passed

since he had tossed a lighted fuse into the ammunition dump, and the earth had resounded with a gigantic explosion, with billows of smoke pouring forth, obliterating all in utter blackness? The faces of his comrades and the heavy-set, powerful figure of his general appeared to him from the darkness.

Summoning all his strength, he rolled over and began to crawl. He was crawling in the direction of the rising sun, panting painfully for breath. He was dizzy, and his legs felt like wood. He began stopping to rest more and more frequently, in the grass, in the dry beds of streams, listening to the gun volleys, changing his direction every so often. Now he had hopes of being saved.

He crawled all that day and all through the night, now coming closer to the river bank that meant salvation, now drawing away from it. On the morning of the third day he came upon a mounted patrol.

"Take me to General Panfilov," he said and lost consciousness. His sense of time and place had vanished.

The soldiers managed to pry open his lips and pour some vodka down his throat. A pleasant warmth spread through his body. The wounded man returned again to the world that had just been about to disappear. A piece of bread was then pushed into his mouth. He bit on it and felt how completely exhausted he was.

Then once again familiar faces drifted before his eyes, but now they were real and not imagined by a tired, fuzzy brain.

"Tikhon!" he shouted at the top of his voice, turning red with the effort.

A warm hand came to rest upon his brow. No, he wasn't dreaming, it was General Panfilov.

"Take it easy, son. Take it easy."

It was the same concerned voice that had said three days before: "Go. We have faith in you!"

He heard the general say, "Give him another glass."

Mikael drank the vodka himself and handed the empty glass back to the soldier who was standing beside the general.

"We thought you were dead," Panfilov said and smiled. "We even held a memorial meeting. And here you are back again. I can't tell you how happy we are to see you."

Mikael gazed in wonder at the general and the men who surrounded him, perceiving the meaning of their words, their astonished and happy smiles. Now everything seemed dear to him: the men, the autumn forest and their life amidst the fire and smoke of war.

"What's the use of dying? I want to live."

"Right!" the general said. "It's never too late to die. And it doesn't take much brains for that, either."

Mikael's mind was clear, everything was coming into focus.

"I want to live till Victory Day, to see the nazis defeated. I won't mind dying then, as long as I live to see that."

The general laughed. Then, turning to the soldier at his side, he said, "Tikhon, you're my witness: Victory Day will dawn without fail, but Mikael certainly won't feel like dying then."

The time was October 1941.

The earth trembled from gun volleys.

X? •

Days and weeks passed. The fields were strewn with corpses. General Panfilov fell in battle. The heroes of Panfilov's division, comrades of Mikael Petrosian, were killed at the approaches to Moscow, and their names have gone down in history. The icy winter passed. Now the melting snow was sucked into the earth, washing away the traces of the previous year's blood.

Once again it was spring. The fields and groves turned green, the first grass appeared on the graves of the fallen soldiers. Spring turned into summer.

In the south the enemy had advanced as far as the Don River. Then, having crossed it, moved on towards the Volga and the Caucasus.

Another autumn came. And another icy winter. It seemed that there would be no end to the war. All this time Mikael was true to himself, always in the heat of battle. At times he thought that the men who fought side by side with him had actually been born amidst gunsmoke and the thunder of cannons, that there was never and would never be another life than that which was war.

At last the long-awaited hour struck. The Soviet Army

began the massive offensive that would not be stopped by any force on earth.

The armies surged forward, carrying along Mikael and his comrades. Hundreds upon thousands of faces passed before Mikael's eyes, and it seemed to him that he knew them all: blond hair and Slavic features, coal-black Caucasian brows and eyes.

Mikael felt that he had always been among these men, that he would never be parted from them.

And then one day he felt that death was imminent. Mikael and two of his comrades had been sent into the enemy's rear as scouts. For a week they had wandered along the forest paths, hiding in the thickets during the day, searching for the way back to their own lines at night. One of the men had been wounded. The other two took turns carrying him. At night the darkness was lighted by flares and rockets. The half-dead body of their comrade weighed down their shoulders. While crossing what was termed "the forward line of the enemy's defences" they landed in a bog. Their feet froze in the icy water. The sticky mire reached as high as their chests as the enemy's shells tore viciously at the night sky.

The wounded man's warm blood trickled down Mikael's neck. He laid his comrade on the ground as soon as they had passed the "death belt".

This had happened the day before. Today, when there were only two of them, they crossed the forest through the dense green grass. The woods were fragrant. Mikael, limping on his wounded leg, held on to Tikhon's shoulder for support. The grass rustled underfoot. There was not a cloud in the clear blue sky. However, the wall of fire beyond the woods still separated the scouts from their unit.

Tikhon recalled something and chuckled. "Remember how you wished for our offensive? If only you could live to see the day, you said, you wouldn't mind dying. That's what you told the general, wasn't it? So I guess the time has come."

"You mean to die? Not on your life! Who wants to die when the battle is only half-won? You mean I won't see our country liberated? Oh, no. But when we reach our own border and look back at our free country, then I don't care if a bullet does finally get me. I can die in peace then, with nothing to regret."

The fighting continued unabated. Spring passed quickly. The ears of wild wheat were heavy. This was the fourth summer of war. The dust of the roads settled on the men's faces, on their rifles and guns, on the tanks, wagons, horses' manes and forest grass. The earth rose up in fountains at every explosion, with shrapnel coming down like rain. The earth groaned as in pain. New graves rose as little mounds all along the roadsides, in the towns and villages where the soldiers had fought their way through. The heat was unbearable. There followed a period of solid rain. A new autumn was upon them, with its falling leaves and new battles.

One day Mikael was adjusting the fire of his unit's guns from his vantage-point in a deserted house. All signs pointed to a new German counter-offensive. The nazis were advancing towards his hideout. At the risk of his own life Mikael ordered his men to fire in his direction. A gun volley followed his order.

Mikael lost consciousness. When he came to his first thought was that he had had something very bitter to drink. A voice nearby said, "He's lucky. There's not a scratch on him."

That evening the news was carried round the world in every language: the Soviet Army had reached the state border.

"You've cheated death again," Tikhon said and smiled at him.

They were lying side by side in the dank trench. It was drizzling. Mikael threw his arm around his comrade's shoulder and exclaimed, "My dear friend, I expect to go on living for a long time yet!"

Another autumn passed, then another winter, and it was spring again. Mikael's company and regiment were passing through the enemy's towns and villages. The dust of alien soil was on his boots, a strange sky was overhead. The buds were opening on the rosebushes, but the big guns continued to roar as the world listened in anxious expectation to the voices of the war.

Mikael was on an operating table in Potsdam. Every inch of his wounded body was on fire.

Once again death had crept up on him. The surgeon bent over him. Now once again everything in the world and he himself dropped into oblivion. The scalpel cut open his chest.

That day Mikael fought off death again.

They were waiting for the fireworks celebrating Victory Day. A May sunset was fading beyond the hospital windows.

"Would you move my bed closer to the window," Mikael said.

His bed was moved up and the wounded man took in the great open spaces. That evening Mikael listened to the volleys and saw the lights of Victory brightening a black, alien sky.

His native land with its green mountain slopes and deep gorges was far, far away. His childhood smiled at him, as did its magic legends and his native countryside. Moscow, too, was far away. There, at the approaches to the capital, he had fought his first successful battle. Thousands of kilometres separated Mikael from the grave of his valiant general who had had such faith in his men and had known that victory would be theirs.

The next morning Tikhon came to see him.

"Well, you've cheated death again! You'll soon be well, that's for sure, because now you certainly won't want to die."

Mikael smiled broadly. "Right you are. We still have to return home. There's so much we still have to see in life. And I want to live!"

"You're not the only one. That's what we were all fighting for, my friend. To live."

The time was May 1945.

Vigen Khechumian

THE BRIDGE

Chief mason Navasard kept looking at the road. He was waiting for Armenak, his only son, with whom he planned to complete his new bridge. However, the bridge had now risen in a high arc above the water, construction was proceeding in full swing, yet his son had not returned, though he had written from Germany to say that he would soon be demobilised.

Each spring the turbulent mountain river would carry away a part of the small wooden bridge at Lernashen, and the villagers would be cut off from the rest of the world for several weeks. Then, when the spring floods subsided, they would patch up the bridge as best they could. This year, however, the river had swept the bridge away completely, leaving no trace of it behind, and the people of Lernashen had asked Navasard, a master bridge-builder, to erect a stone bridge. That is why the old man had begun working before his son returned.

Navasard had known the site for the new bridge since childhood. He had followed the river to its source and had seen the beautiful three-span bridge his grandfather Lunkianos had built at its lower reaches.

The river charged down from the mountains, continuing on its way through a deep gorge, hemmed in by solid rock.

Its banks were covered by wild nut trees, hawthorns and weeping willows whose slender branches dipped into the water, while a multitude of bright flowers adorned the gorge.

The July sun, at its hottest, had scorched the green of spring in places and now a new growth of grass with wide, sharp blades had covered these spots. It rustled drily in the morning wind.

Navasard was busy working from dawn to dusk and so did not notice summer bringing its bountiful gifts.

Towards evening the workmen would go to Lernashen for the night, but he, after the last stone of the day had been set in place, would go to his tent, there to sit and think, his deep-set, wise eyes scanning all that was within his range of vision.

He liked to watch the shadow of the incompleting span slip across the water and reach the far bank, as if completing it. He would fill in the empty space mentally, constructing the missing cornice and railings until darkness fell and the last shadows were swallowed up by the night.

He always liked to think about his forefathers, bridge-builders all, before he fell asleep.

His grandfather Lunkianos had built stone bridges, as had his father Khachatur, a stern man and keeper of traditions. As a youth he had learned his father's trade, as had his own son Armenak, while working by his side.

"It must be seventy-five years now since the men of our family began building bridges across the mad rivers of Armenia. Why, that's practically a century," Navasard mused. "And who can say that their fathers before them did not follow the same trade? The witnesses are all here: the hundreds of large and small bridges built over a hundred, nay, over a thousand years ago. Fifteen or twenty generations don't seem like much, but they add up to a thousand or fifteen hundred years."

Recalling all that had been done and the ancient stone "witnesses" of his family's labour, old Navasard continued his musings, which were leading up to his main idea: "Ever since the beginning of time my forefathers have been building bridges across the rivers of Armenia. Now we are building them, me and the branch that is a continuation of myself." And he looked around, as if to see a familiar face with whom to share his thoughts.

In his mind's eye he saw his son, but it seemed to the old man that Armenak was taking objection to his words, that he doubted them. Navasard hurried to explain, "That's exactly how it was, my boy. Our land is small and there were very few people in those days. There was no need for many to take up this trade, so it was left to a single branch. Our branch was scattered all over Armenia. Grandfather

Lunkianos said he was from Erzynek, Khachatur was born in the Mush Valley and then went to live for years in the Sasun Mountains, while your grandmother came from Diarbekir. Then the two of us, you and me, crossed the Araks River and came to live here."

Navasard fell silent. His cracked lips were compressed into a thin line. A small doubt had crept into his soul: would Armenak return to his native parts and if he did, would he take up his father's ancient trade?

"Tell me the truth, boy, so that I'll know what to do," the old man whispered, his eyes on the incomplected bridge span which in the darkness he suddenly imagined was demolished.

There was no reply, and the old man fell silent again, listening to the many voices of the night.

A breeze from the river whistled in the cracks of the cliffs; a small creature crawling through the grass made it rustle; a woodpecker suddenly gave forth a long drilling rattle; a rock torn from the cliff rumbled by; then there was a splash and all was silence.

Navasard was far from all these night noises. He sat there under the spell of new thoughts that took his mind off his son and his own doubts, if only for a short while. He sat there smiling, or bringing his eyes to rest on something that was invisible in the night, as if a distant and long-forgotten image had suddenly taken shape in the darkness. He would shut his eyes and begin to speak with people who had long since passed on to another world, people who had once been close to him and had left him so many fond memories.

One evening Navasard saw a group of soldiers coming down the road. He felt a keen longing for his son. The soldiers were soon gone, but the old man sat on in his favourite spot long into the night, gazing thoughtfully at the opposite bank and the flickering lights of Lernashen.

Earlier in the day he had wanted to ask one of the workmen to help him raise a stone and place it on the wall, but his pride had prevented him from doing so. Now his right arm ached, interfering with his thoughts. He rubbed his arm and tried to forget the pain.

His strength was ebbing. But there was a time when he had been able to raise huge stones to chest level and set

them in place. Now he could barely raise a heavy stone as high as his knees.

"The pain will pass," he said aloud. "I won't think about it. If you think about it, it won't go away."

Navasard obeyed this command. He shut his eyes and once again fond memories of people long since dead came back to him.

"Grandfather Lunkianos, you said that a bridge built by a master craftsman would never have to be repaired, that it would stand forever. You were right, Grandfather. But your son, Khachatur, may he rest in peace, did have to repair the high bridge at Sanain once. Some stones fell out of the revetment, and he put them back in place. Then, twelve years later, the very same stones fell out again. I put them back, and they're still there. Shall I tell you the secret? The stones were secured by metal wedges. Khachatur said that the wedges were of no importance, that the stones would be just as secure without them. But no! If a builder, a master craftsman of our branch, used metal wedges a thousand years ago, it means he had good reason to. May God rest his soul."

Navasard was about to say something else when he suddenly clutched his arm and moaned.

"I guess this will be my last bridge," he whispered when he had finally caught his breath.

Never before had the old man thought about death. The pain in his arm made him think of it now. However, the idea had taken root, and the old man could not shake it off.

He rose, went down to the river bank, plunged his arm up to his elbow into the water to feel the foundation stones of the bridge. The slime-covered rocks were slippery.

"Time has done its work," he said and sighed contentedly. "These aren't just stones now, they're sturdy legs sunk into the ground. I've given them some of the strength of my own arms and legs. Now they're gaining strength and I'm losing mine."

Several times during the night Navasard was awakened by the pain in his arm. He turned and tossed, and finally, unable to sleep, he sat up and looked to the East, waiting for dawn.

The night was dark. He saw a beam of light racing along the road, illuminating the crags, slipping over the tops of

the nut trees and disappearing for a moment behind a jutting cliff.

Soon he heard the sound of an engine. The car turned off the high road and stopped at the bridge. The passengers alighted.

"We'll have to walk," a deep voice said.

"Is the ford far from here?"

"It's a bit farther downstream," the deep voice replied. "If the mason's up, I'll ask him."

Gravel crunched underfoot.

Navasard leaned on his right hand to rise when a sharp pain shot through his arm.

"It's from being chilled," he said. "I had it in cold water too long."

"Are you up?" he heard someone saying.

Navasard smiled wryly. The pain was so sharp it took his breath away. He could neither speak nor rise.

"What's the matter, old man? You've got to finish your last bridge. Come on, get up!" he mumbled to himself, as he struggled to his knees.

Someone lit a match outside and stuck his head into the tent.

"The ford's down the river a ways. Forty or fifty feet from here," Navasard said weakly and fell back onto the bed.

"Hurry! The old man's sick!" the stranger shouted.

"It's nothing," Navasard whispered and closed his eyes.

That was all he remembered.

When he opened his eyes again the sun had reached the top of the mountain, and the shadow of the incompleting bridge that fell on the bank was as shapeless and unfamiliar as a pile of rocks.

Neither the car nor its passengers were in sight. A group of worried workmen stood outside the tent.

"He's opened his eyes!" someone said as Navasard looked about in wonder.

"They've gone for the doctor. They should be back soon," another man said.

Navasard raised his brows, leaned on his right hand and sat up. The pain was gone.

"What are you hanging about here for? Why aren't you working?" he said sternly. "Have you shaped the stones for

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the cornice, Musheg? I'm getting up," he mumbled and, indeed, he was soon standing firmly on his feet.

"You really should stay in bed. The doctor'll be here soon," Musheg said anxiously.

Navasard cast a hostile glance at him, gathered up his tools in his short apron and set off without another word.

The men made way for him.

He was stoop-shouldered, but his gait was firm. The workmen gazed after him. Navasard reached the bank and went down to the water's edge. He scooped up some water and washed his face. Then he straightened up and looked at the sun.

"The day's gone. I've slept through the day," he grumbled, realising for the first time what had happened.

The events of the night seemed strange to him now. He looked in wonder at the road along which the car had come, then turned to look at the workmen who were still standing around. He walked towards the bridge, his eyes on the ground.

"You've disgraced yourself, Navasard. Nothing like this ever happened to you before. Can't you hold out until the last stone is put in place?"

When the doctor arrived the old mason was high up on the scaffolding, working with such calm concentration that one could hardly believe anything had happened or could have happened to him.

The doctor, a young girl with bobbed hair, went as far as the water, but was afraid to climb the shaky scaffolding. The old man stubbornly refused to come down.

"What did you bring this girl here for? There's nothing the matter with me," he said.

"You're wrong. Maybe you need some medicine," the man who had brought the doctor said.

Navasard thought he recognised the deep voice. "Was that you last night?"

"Yes. Come on down. Do you want me to take you to the district clinic?"

"What's your name?" Navasard asked.

"Armen."

The old man's eyes became friendly. He looked at the stranger fondly.

"That's fine. So your name is Armenak," he said, half-

speaking to himself. Then he added hurriedly, "You go along now, son. If I feel bad I'll get there. And when we've finished the bridge I'll come to visit you."

The stranger shook his head, smiled and tried to talk the old man into at least sleeping over at Lernashen, but Navasard would have none of it. "You can't talk me into it. I've never yet deserted a half-finished bridge of mine."

The car drove off with the doctor and Armen. Navasard looked after them and whispered, "Armenak".

All through the day there was no pain in his arm or his back. The old man forgot all about his ailments. He worked steadily, his skilled hands setting stone after stone in place, stopping now and then to wipe away the sweat that trickled down his face which was coated with grey stone-dust.

That evening the workmen helped him to carry his tent over to the other side of the river where they would start on the second pier.

"I'll stay over with you," Musheg said, falling behind the other men.

"What for?"

"The boys and I talked it over. You might need me for something."

Navasard looked at him, then at the workmen who had started home and said, "Oh, yes, I nearly forgot. Don't forget to bring me some bread when you come to work tomorrow. I've eaten the last of mine today. Go on, boy, and don't be late," he added and smiled craftily.

Having seen Musheg off, he walked around the tent, examining the new spot. You couldn't see the village from here. Lernashen was hidden beyond the high bank. All he could see were bits of the road lying on the rocks like scattered lengths of ribbon.

During the day cars traversed this road, coming quite near the river. However, they turned off at the crossroads and disappeared from view. Some of the cars took the fork to Lernashen, but at the first sight of the incompletd bridge they would come to a stop. The passengers would alight and begin a discussion as they all looked at the river. Navasard could never make out the words, but he could always guess what they were saying.

"They need my bridge," he would say to himself and

gaze after the departing automobile with a feeling of gratitude.

That night a new and disturbing thought occurred to Navasard. "So you say this is going to be your last bridge, do you?" he asked himself angrily. "And who's going to build bridges for people after you've gone? And what about your Armenak? He still hasn't returned."

Navasard got to thinking about the men who would carry on after him and about those who needed his bridges. Sleep deserted him. He got up and went outside, and there he sat under the sky.

There were fewer stars out tonight, and the air was humid. A bird cried loudly, then stopped, as if to listen to the echo of its voice. The dogs that were guarding the flock of sheep nearby whined. He heard the sleepy bleating and a strange grating sound which was probably made by the sheep licking rock salt.

A campfire was burning, sending up billows of smoke. Suddenly, the flames burst through, illuminating everything, and Navasard saw the shepherd bent over the fire.

"He's roasting meat," he decided and recalled his father Khachatur celebrating the completion of each new bridge by roasting meat on a spit by the piers. The clean stones would turn black from the soot and would look old, while the aroma of roasting meat would drown out the smell of fresh lime.

"Chief mason Khachatur, your custom still remains a mystery to me," Navasard said. "You were probably offering a sacrifice of fire and smoke to your ancient gods so that they would guard and protect your bridge for ever. Am I wrong? And I recall that you would cross yourself, but your words were not addressed to the Lord of the Cross. You would say, 'Sun God, I have built another bridge with your help. Preserve it, for people need it.'"

A dog whined nearby. In another moment a shepherd appeared from the darkness. He was carrying something.

"Good evening, Father!" he said. "Will you have some roast meat?"

He slipped the meat off the wooden skewer skilfully, put it on a flatcake and sat down beside Navasard.

The shepherd was a youth of about sixteen with full lips that made him look very childish.

Navasard's eyes were accustomed to the dark and so he noticed the large scar on the boy's cheek. "Where'd you get such a scar?" he asked.

"I got it when I was very little. I was running across our bridge when a board cracked, and I dropped through into the water. There must have been a nail or something sticking out, and it slashed my face. Now I have this to remember it by."

Navasard could see his white teeth as the boy smiled. Then he said, looking towards the river, "Will your bridge stand a thousand years, Father?"

"We shall see," Navasard replied calmly and was surprised at his own words. However, he repeated them: "We shall see."

As he went to bed later on he felt a stab in his heart and recalled his unexpected reply to the shepherd earlier in the night. "And will you live to see?" he asked himself and immediately replied, "I think you still have many more bridges to build, old fellow."

This was his last thought as he dropped off to sleep and his first upon awakening. He got down to work before the men arrived from Lernashen. During the day he felt several sharp pangs in his heart. It was as if someone were pricking him with a needle. "What if the pain in my arm and shoulder has moved to my heart?" he wondered. He dropped his work and sat down to rest, breathing hard. However, when he saw that a young workman had left off work as well, he got up again and said sternly, "This is no time to be sitting around, my boy. Hand me those stones."

That night he was asleep the moment he lay down. Awakening at dawn, he felt as sprightly as if his youth had returned to him. He washed in the river and chuckled when he thought of how poorly he had been feeling the past few days.

"Cold water never hurt anyone yet," he said as he rolled his trousers up to his knees and entered the river.

He stood there in the water, bareheaded and bare-chested and smiled with pleasure. The network of tiny wrinkles around his eyes seemed to ripple.

The sun was rising above the mountain peaks.

"It was the same fifty years ago. As soon as Father fell asleep at night, I'd cross over the water to the other side."

That summer they were completing a two-span bridge across the Vorotan River. All that remained was to put up the railings and pave it. It was a hot, scorching summer. The only wind rose at night, covering the bridge with a thick layer of dust. His father would go to bed as soon as night fell, but he would make his way stealthily across the river to where Nazan would be waiting for him. They would sit under the willows, concealed from the world. Nazan's muslin kerchief would fall to her shoulders and then to the grass. Thus did each night fly by, until the stars went out.

One night Navasard was so tired and heady with love that he returned across the unfinished bridge. Being too tired to climb to the tent, he lay down on the grass by the bridge and fell into a deep sleep. He had not been asleep for more than an hour when Khachatur awoke him and pointed to the tracks across the bridge.

Thus was Navasard's secret discovered.

"You certainly whipped me hard that day, Khachatur," the old man said and chuckled. "You said we'd be the disgrace of the village. And you took your hat and went to talk to Nazan's parents. You didn't work that day, and when you returned in the evening you were tipsy. Within a week you had arranged for our wedding by the bridge." Navasard bent over. He splashed cold water on his face and bronzed chest again and headed towards the bank with a firm step.

"Ah, where are you, my Nazan? May you rest in peace. You were as warm as a fledgling under its mother's wing, and as sweet as a dream. I want you to know that after your death every bridge I built was an offering for you."

Navasard had a glass of Cornelian cherry vodka at breakfast in memory of his dear ones who had passed away.

"You have become my bridge. You have helped me to cross over to this side."

He was in high spirits, happy that his ailments had disappeared for good. As he worked Navasard recalled an old proverb: "He who walks ahead is a bridge for those who follow." And he added, "As soon as I become a bridge I'll come to you, Nazan. Just wait a bit, my sweet."

From that day on he became ever more impatient for his son Armenak to return. Still, there was no word from him.

"Va! What's become of you?" he demanded, but his son did not reply.

On Sunday morning Navasard decided to go to the district centre, which was some six kilometres from the bridge site. It would have taken no time if he had hitched a ride, but he decided to walk. He crossed over to the other side of the river and headed along the canyon.

A multitude of springs, the water of each more icy and delicious than the previous, spouted from the cliffs and ran down into the river. Navasard saw small trout in the pool at the source of one spring.

The walnuts were ripening. They were still covered with cracked green shells, but the kernels had become whiter and more solid. He cracked several nuts and ate them. They had a milky taste.

The sweetbriar hips were reddening, and from afar they looked like unripe blackberries.

Two girls were walking through the tall grass and flowers on the opposite bank, watching the smiling old man with interest.

"I seem to be thinking of you more often these days, Nazan. You were like these girls, but they don't wear shawls, and they live in other times."

When the girls reached the bend in the river where the canyon broadened they fell behind. Navasard stopped to look back at them and continued thinking aloud: "When your son returns I'll marry him off. You agree to that, don't you, Nazan? I'll take the gold ring I've carried in my breast pocket and I'll set off to speak to the girl's parents."

As he continued on his way he imagined his cherished dream coming true. He would go to Lernashen village and speak first to one villager, then to another, until he had chosen the right girl. Then he'd speak to her parents, and put his son's wedding ring on the table. News of so-and-so's daughter being betrothed to the son of the chief mason Navasard would travel up and down the river. People would speak with envy of the happy fate of the girl who had been chosen to enter Navasard's family.

"I'll dance at your wedding, Armenak. Then we'll build another bridge together, and after that I can die in peace."

He stopped at the end of the canyon and looked down, as if his wish would really come true there under the nut trees

on the river bank. Then he sighed and said, "Well, I don't really expect to live to see my grandson."

Navasard put his son's last letter home on the post office table and reread it for the tenth time. Then he began to write, shaping each letter carefully:

"Greetings. If you want to know how we are, my dear son Armenak, we are all well, although we miss you and want to know why your return has been delayed. Your friends and relations, and all their small and grown children, and your neighbours as well all send you their regards. And I do, too. I want you to know, son, that my bridge is waiting for you. There is something I have been thinking about: I want your bride to cross this bridge over to our side. And don't forget to send me a telegram before you start out."

That seemed to take care of everything. However, after some thought Navasard added a last line: "Your father Navasard, who is waiting for a letter and for you to come home."

It was noon by the time the old man had finished writing and had handed in the letter and the clerk had helped him with the foreign address. He went out and stopped in the middle of the road. "I'll get tired if I walk back, and we start work early tomorrow." And so he decided to hitch a ride.

All the way back, riding in the top of an open truck, he spoke not a word, paying no attention to the people next to him.

He was day-dreaming, thinking about his future daughter-in-law. She would have thick braids and dark eyes like Nazan. His son had eyes and brows as black as coal. Armenak was tall and broad-shouldered. And his grandson should be like him. Time would pass, he would no longer be among the living, but the bridge-builders of his family would go on, generation upon generation, undestructible as the many stone bridges they had built.

His eyes came to rest on his hands that lay heavily in his lap. What won't a man's horny, calloused, bruised and battered hands create!

Suddenly he smiled, recalling something. It had happened long ago. Very long ago. One summer evening he had returned home drunk and fell asleep. Nazan sat down by the head of the bed and wiped the perspiration from his brow.

She was worried, thinking he had taken ill. Each time her hand touched his brow he tried to open his eyes, but never succeeded. Then he fell asleep. When he awoke at midnight he saw his wife through his half-open lids. She was on her knees by his side, kissing his rough and heavy hand.

He would never forget the words she had spoken then: "I would die for these hands of yours—they're as solid as a bridge."

The truck stopped at the fork in the road. Navasard climbed down, turned towards the river and saw some people standing on the bank. A man and a boy of about six or seven stood by the bridge. A young woman was sitting on a suitcase nearby. Her blond hair, tied in a bun on her neck, shone like gold in the sun.

"If the bridge were finished they could have crossed right over," Navasard thought ruefully. "What are they waiting for? If they go down to the water there's a beam they could cross over to the other side."

He took several more steps and stopped to rub his eyes. He thought that the man standing by the bridge had waved to him and was coming towards him. His heart began to pound, his breath came rapidly.

"I think he's in uniform-----Could it be Armenak?"

In another moment he had recognised his son, who was now running towards him. Yes, it was he! Navasard tried to blot out the blond woman and the boy. "They're probably strangers," he said hopefully and quickened his step.

Father and son had finally met after a separation of so many years. They embraced, trying to hide their excitement and joy. But Armenak wiped away a tear with the palm of his hand and the old man cleared his throat and said in a shaky voice: "Armenak! My boy! You're home at last!"

"Father! Oh, Father!" Armenak cried, embracing the old man again.

Navasard sensed something in his son's eyes and turned cautiously. The boy, who was standing behind him and was as blond as the young woman, was watching them, his blue eyes opened wide. The woman rose from the suitcase and looked shyly now at Armenak, now at the boy.

"Who is she?" the old man asked his son softly, his eyes darting to the woman.

Armenak spoke to her in Russian. She approached quick-

ly and offered Navasard her hand, blushing as she said, "How do you do, Father."

Navasard frowned at his son, who said, "I didn't write. I wanted it to be a surprise, Father. This is my wife. And this is your grandson."

Navasard raised his brows. He seemed puzzled, as if he had not understood Armenak's words. His excitement was gone. He shook the blonde woman's hand, but pulled his own back quickly and said to his son, "My grandson? Is this her child?" There was a disappointed smile on his face.

"Armen has told me so much about you. I'm so glad we've finally met," the woman said awkwardly, exchanging glances with her husband.

Of all the words she had spoken in Russian, the old man understood but one: his son's name. The word jarred upon him. He smiled crookedly again and muttered, "Your name's Armenak. Why does she call you Armen? If she's found herself a husband, she can at least call him by his proper name."

Armen and his family settled down in Lernashen. The old man spent the day with them, but he could not overcome his feeling of hostility towards his daughter-in-law, the boy and his son.

The old man's hopes of finding his son an Armenian bride had crumbled. He did not understand the language spoken by his daughter-in-law and grandson. His own son had become a stranger to him, for he no longer felt the warmth in Armenak's attitude he had missed so during their separation.

Now, when he was near, Navasard felt depressed and lonely. This pain was more terrible than his former ills. Everything about his son's family was alien to him, he felt awkward and out of place with them.

His daughter-in-law shared this feeling of awkwardness. Armenak did not know how to bring the two of them together, how to pacify his father. Could the old man ever understand the deep love that bound them, a love that was born in the midst of the war? True, she was not Armenian, and she had a son, but her love and tender care had saved his life.

Armenak never did tell his father about this, but the old man was not interested anyway.

Each morning Armenak and his father would set off to work together. They worked in silence. His father tried not to look at his son or his grandson playing on the river bank.

Summer was ending. The nuts were falling, and the branches of the hawthorns were covered with bright-red berries. The grass, which had withered a second time from the heat but which would weather the snow, was yellow, short and sturdy.

The bridge would soon be completed. All but some odds and ends had been done, yet the old man's alienation remained.

One night it began to drizzle. Towards dawn a cold wind began to blow from the mountains. It tore the dry leaves from the trees, swirling them around the tent. Navasard awoke early from the cold and in a bad temper.

The previous evening he had tried to talk to his son about the future. At first, they had spoken calmly enough. The old man had questioned him, and Armenak had replied to his questions. He told his father that he had built and also blown up bridges in the course of the war. But their conversation took a nasty turn when Armenak began speaking of steel bridges and of how quickly they were built, praising their beauty and light weight.

The old man saw red. So his son had no use for the bridges built by his ancestors?

"Neither your grandfather Khachatur nor your father ever built an iron bridge," he said angrily, "The land of Armenia rests on rock, and a bridge must be built only of rock, and of roughly-hewn rock at that, so that people will stop to think about the builder's difficult trade and of his great strength! Rise, Grandfather Lunkianos and Father Khachatur, come and watch your great-grandson build his iron bridges!"

"I can understand you, Father. After all, you've never seen them," Armenak said, but the old man refused to listen.

"So you say you've blown up many bridges? And what about your conscience? Didn't your conscience bother you at all?"

Navasard hadn't intended to berate his son for having blown up bridges during the war. He knew they could not be left to the enemy. He was simply scolding his son as a father has a right to, hoping thus to bring him back to the

road followed by the bridge-builders of their family through the centuries; he was punishing Armenak for having smashed his dreams by bringing home a woman of another nationality.

"What have you done, Armenak!" the old man exclaimed now, recalling everything they had said. "And when I depart from this world, who will throw our bridge across from this bank to the other?"

That had been the previous evening. Navasard moaned. He cradled his head in his arms and wondered: "Perhaps those iron bridges are not all that bad after all." But he would never admit it out loud, and so he exclaimed with annoyance, "So you'll be building iron bridges after I'm gone, son! Well, many thanks from all of us, both young and old!"

Thus, dissatisfied, he stamped out of the tent, gazing absently at the dark sky and the murky river water, as if the centuries-old traditions of his ancestors lay buried in the darkness.

He went down to the water's edge to wash and came upon a toy car left there by his grandson. He stood looking at it for a moment, then bent down and picked it up, visualising the blond, blue-eyed child as he did.

Navasard stood there, gripping the toy, not knowing what to do. For some time now he had been bothered by a thought that demanded serious attention: perhaps he was wrong in ignoring his son's family. But it was not easy to admit his error. He could not avoid the question any longer.

"You seem to be a nice boy," he said with a sigh as he thought of his grandson. And then he became angry with himself. "As if I didn't know that before."

His hands shook. As he turned the toy over he saw that one of the wheels was loose. He went back to the tent thoughtfully, fixed the wheel and went out again.

In the East the edge of the sky had turned grey. Sparrows were beginning to chirp here and there, and the water now resembled tarnished silver.

Navasard stood there, fingering the toy, wondering why his hands were shaking and his eyes were smarting as from smoke. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve and headed towards the nut trees. There he filled his pockets with nuts and set off for the village.

His son and daughter-in-law were up by the time he reached their house. Armenak was drinking tea, while his wife was packing his lunch. They both looked alarmed when Navasard entered.

"Is anything wrong, Father?" Armenak said.

"Good morning," Navasard replied, removing his cap.

There was a moment's silence.

"Sit down and have some breakfast, Father," his daughter-in-law said and blushed. The silence was broken.

"Is the boy still sleeping?" Navasard asked Armenak.

Armenak translated his words for his wife.

"Yes," she replied, nodding.

The old man went over to his grandson's bed, set the toy on the floor, emptied the nuts onto the blanket and kissed the sleeping boy's brow and whispered: "Get up, grandson, this is no time for a man to be sleeping. We're going to work. The bridge is waiting for us."

Armenak, also in a whisper, translated his words for his wife. She blushed deeper still from emotion, went over to the boy's bed and said, "Get up, dear. Grandfather's come for you. Come on. I'll help you dress."

The three of them set off for work together, grandfather and grandson walking on ahead, Armenak a few steps behind. Whenever the old man spoke to the boy, Armenak would catch up with them and translate his words.

"I'll teach you how to build stone bridges," Navasard was saying, squeezing the boy's hand in his own. "It's the tradition of your ancestors. I had a son and he used to build stone bridges, too, but now he's building iron bridges, he's turned off our road. The time will come when you'll build your first bridge. Then I'll remain on this bank, while you'll cross over my body of a bridge to your own side. Then stone bridges will go on being built across our mad rivers, like my grandfather Lunkianos did and my dead father Khachatur and your own grandfather, the chief mason Navasard."

After work that day his grandson stayed over in Navasard's tent.

"Tell my daughter-in-law," he said, avoiding his son's eyes, "that I'm forever thankful to her for giving me such a fair-haired grandson. There are fair-haired boys in Armenia, too, with eyes that are just as blue. But tell her not to feel too proud and become stuck-up. Tell her that accord-

ing to our custom he is to remain with me. That's all I have to say. Go on, Armenak, it's getting dark. Good night, son." After Armenak had gone he added softly, so that no one would hear his words, "And give her my regards. She's a mother, a woman, and her heart is very big."

The old man kept getting up all through the night to cover his grandson, mumbling to himself, feeling his heart fill out with a great, all-consuming desire to live.

"There's something to live for, my grandson. If the Sun God has given me someone like you, it means he's warding off my death. To tell the truth, no death can carry off old Navasard for he has someone to live for, my little bridge!"

They say that in one of the mountainous regions of Armenia they are building a new stone bridge across a turbulent river. This is a big, high bridge. Chief mason Navasard's tent is pitched on the bank nearby. There are two cots inside. After work the old man sleeps on one and his grandson, a fourteen-year-old boy with sun-bleached hair and intelligent blue eyes, sleeps on the other.

Death so far has by-passed old Navasard and his branch.

Mkrtich Sarkisian

HOW YOU'VE CHANGED, GIRLS

How you've changed, girls. Honestly, you have. When I was young girls were not at all like you. I know that you'll say time marches on, and we must keep in step with the times. Naturally, that's only right, but that's not all there is to it. Don't misunderstand me. It's not only your high heels and stylish dresses that have changed you. Not at all! I also wear the current styles in men's clothes, but that hasn't made me one bit more modern. It's simply that I've no choice in the matter.

But I think we've gone off at a tangent. To get back to what I was saying, you girls have changed so, and, knock on wood, it's for the best.

However, let the facts speak for themselves. I'll tell you how I fell in love many years ago and how my neighbour's son Karen fell in love not long ago.

My Love

Our town was not very big. It would take at least fifteen towns this size to make a city like Yerevan. We even had a collective farm. The chairman's name was Garso, or, to be exact, Rusty Old Garso. They say Garso's driver gave him his nickname.

Garso didn't like to walk. Not him! The farm's car was like a pair of boots to him: he went to the fields and the district committee by car; if he wanted to talk to someone on the way he stopped the car, stuck his head out of the window and talked, argued or scolded whoever it was. In a word, just as we wear our shoes until we get to bed, he rode the farm car as far as his doorstep. If he could, he

would have driven right up to his bed. In a word, Garso was stuck as fast as rust to the car.

I had never seen him at his full height. To me he was always a head sticking out of a car window. All I knew was that he had four wheels under him, a loud horn, a pair of blinding headlights at night and a driver to his left. He didn't get from place to place like the rest of us. No, he always zipped along with clouds of yellow dust billowing up in his wake. I'll never forget that dust. It stuck to the car, it stuck to his eyelashes, it covered his clothes and his face, it had eaten away the polish on his boots and had seeped into his very soul. "Dammit, it's like rust!" Garso would say and spit. Then he'd say "Step on it!" to the driver.

The car would bolt forward, onto the shiny asphalt back of the road. The yellow dust would stop, as if by some charm, and dissolve as it hit the paving.

When the car entered town and stopped outside the farm office, Garso would nod casually to the collective farmers and would then stalk into his office.

"He's glum again. He's either been in a storm or is going to rage like a storm himself," Old Mato would say, always sensing a storm in the chairman's scowl. "Somebody should ask him why he can't see farther than his nose."

"He's near-sighted. The rust has got at his eyes. He can't see the ground underfoot, and he never raises his eyes to the sky. He's just Rusty Old Garso, and that's all there is to it!"

You might ask me what connection there is between love and Garso. Don't jump to conclusions. Life shows us that rust can sometimes bring forth gold, that there is dust the colour of mustard, on the one hand, and silvery stardust, as on the leaves of the pshat, on the other.

Rusty Old Garso had a daughter named Arev, Arevik—which means sunshine. Her stepmother was called Madame Rosa. Arevik was like the sun, but Rosa was not at all like a rose. I called her Madame Bramble. And there was poor Arevik, caught between Rust and Bramble. She'd be up before dawn and wouldn't get to bed before midnight. Her days were spent running errands and doing all the housework except the dinner.

“Hurry! Where the devil are you? Get me the onions!”

“Oh, you’re worse than a dead cat! Can’t you move any faster?”

“Air the bedding! And be quick about it!”

That would be Madame Bramble. Old Rusty added his share:

“Arev, polish my boots!”

“Arev, my coat’s dusty!”

“Arev, there’s dust all over!”

They didn’t love Arevik. Oh, Arevik.... She was more than the sun to me. She was in the ninth grade at school, and I was in the tenth when I came to realise this. Our classrooms faced each other across the hall. Our houses faced each other across the road. In a word, we were like the Sun and the Earth: always in opposition, always so far away.

Arevik was slim and beautiful. She had large, dark, frightened eyes. She had become very beautiful, and that was why her eyes were red-rimmed: Madame Bramble couldn’t stand the sight of her and never missed a chance to hurt her. Garso was right in step, and so Arevik’s great dark eyes were always brimming with tears.

I waited for her outside their gate. “How you’ve grown, Arevik. How pretty you’ve become.”

She looked at me in wonder. I could see she didn’t believe me. “Don’t you think they taunt me enough without you adding to it, Armen?”

“But I’m telling you the truth, Arevik. You really are pretty.”

She seemed to be angry, she even blushed, but her eyes were smiling. “Well? Anything else?” She tried to pass.

“Come to the orchard this evening. I’ll be waiting for you.”

She hesitated for a moment and then went quickly into the house.

That evening she came to the orchard, and the evening became filled with sunshine.

“Hello,” she said shyly.

We were silent for a very long time. My lips whispered fond words I had never spoken before, but they whispered them silently, in my mind alone. She watched me keenly, her head lowered, and was silent.

"I'm so glad you came," I said. "You're so lovely. So lovely..."

"That's why I came. No one ever said that to me before." She was silent again, as if regretting what she had said. Then, a few moments later, she added, "You weren't joking, were you, Armen?"

"I swear, you're like the sun, Arevik!"

We walked back to town and parted reluctantly.

It was a love without words and without kisses, a great, overwhelming love without pledges, hopes or promises. We walked on in silence, mentally kissing and embracing each other, then wandered back home along the same road. Madame Bramble had beaten Arevik twice for being away so long.

Meanwhile, spring had come to the fields. It was calling to us. After school was out one day, Arevik and I went off to pick violets.

God, what a spring that was! The mountains, meadows and valleys seemed dipped in green and hung out in the sun. Countless flowers were scattered all over. That was when I first heard Arevik laugh, so happily. She dashed about after butterflies, then plunged into the creek and splashed me all over.

"I'm crazy, aren't I?" she said.

Now she really did resemble the sun. When she sat down on the grass to arrange her bouquet of flowers, I bent over and kissed her slim neck. Her skin was warm and as soft as velvet. My lips tasted flowers and sunshine. She did not protest, but when I looked at her face her tear-filled eyes were frightened. She began to weep.

"Why did you do that?" She covered her face with her hands. Had there been anything wrong in what I had done? What was wrong about kissing her? Her eyes were as red as if she'd had another scolding. But I had only kissed her.

We started back home. Suddenly, a column of dust rose up around us. Arevik stopped dead. "Oh, it's Papa!"

Her father had already opened the car door. A dusty monster was advancing upon us. Then I noticed that Garso had two legs and not four wheels. I had never dreamed he was so big and broad-shouldered.

"What are you doing here, Arevik?"

First, she tried to hide behind her bouquet. Then she offered it in silence to her father, but he flung the flowers to the ground.

"What are you doing here with this beggar, you slut?" he shouted.

The dust had devoured the flowers, it would soon consume us, too. Garso turned to face me. "Watch your step, boy! You're getting out of your depth!" He grabbed Arevik by her braids and shoved her into the car. It roared off, raising a trail of dust. The dust was the colour of mustard and, oh, how that car needed a good wash!

That evening the old men gathered to talk outside the farm office. "He's glum again. He's either been in a storm or is going to rage like a storm himself," Old Mato said. "Somebody should ask him why he can't see farther than his nose."

"He's near-sighted. The rust has eaten away his eyes. He can't see what's underfoot, and he never raises his eyes to the sky. Ah, what's the use of talking? He's Rusty Old Garso, and that's all there is to it."

The storm broke over our heads. It had become practically impossible for us to meet. Arevik was even afraid to come up to me in school.

After graduating I went to Yerevan to continue my studies. Some time later I learned that Arevik had been married. Then I learned that Rusty Garso had been relieved of his post. They say he now has two arms and two legs, and he uses his legs for walking. The road to town has been paved. The dust doesn't blow along there any more, to settle on the cars, the eyelashes and the souls of people.

Somewhere deep in my heart is the memory of Arevik whose neck tasted of flowers and sunshine.

Strange, isn't it, girls? But this is not ancient history, you know.

All this happened not more than twenty years ago.

Karen's Love

"Hey, Karen!"

It was Arevik calling. Whenever she appeared outside our windows everyone's spirit rose. It was as if our hearts

were suddenly filled with joy. In a blue dress Arevik looked like a bit of the sky come down to us. Karen, whistling "Marina", would run down the stairs. Then, slipping his arm through Arevik's, he would dash off along the roads of love, taking his precious bit of sky with him.

The yard turned dark before our eyes. Even eighty-year-old Vano, half-deaf and quite a wreck, sighed as he looked after them and said in a voice barely audible to himself but quite audible to us: "Ah, what a girl! That's one I'd like to kiss."

Our neighbour Auntie Yeranui would look at him scathingly and say, "At his age! He should be ashamed of himself!"

Our neighbour Karo, whom Arevik has scorned, would go upstairs after Arevik and Karen had gone and sing Canio's "Laugh, clown, laugh" aria from "Pagliacci" till he was hoarse. However, he never laughed. Then he would go out to seek consolation elsewhere.

This scene was repeated daily. If the girl did not come, the neighbours in the yard would become anxious.

"The weather will take a turn for the worse. It's going to rain," Old Vano would say in the midst of a fine day.

Auntie Yeranui would look at him with compassion and say, "Poor soul, he's cold in such heat! It's old age, that's what it is."

Karo would not appear; nor would he sing his aria. On such days I felt happy for him. After all, he was preserving his voice.

If the girl were late, Karen would come slowly down the stairs. We could hear how heavily his feet dragged. If he wasn't whistling, it meant Arevik had not come. If he suddenly began to whistle we would all heave a sigh of relief and hurry out onto our balconies to see them off.

Our house is lost among the greenery of bushes and trees which, growing taller and denser with each passing year, have completely concealed our pretty building and now jealously protect it from alien eyes. There is something very comforting in this greenery. It absorbs the traffic noises and protects us from the heat in summer; in winter the trees are covered with hoar-frost and resemble the trees of the

Siberian taiga. In autumn, when all is bare, our garden resembles Old Vano: the garden is cold, Old Vano is cold, and it seems that the winter sun is cold from looking at them.

Everyone calls our garden Lovers' Garden. Couples kiss here the year round and at all hours of the day and night. If there were more than twenty-four hours in a day, they'll kiss then, too.

All that is good in life is catching, especially kissing. And so, looking down at these kissing lovers, even I, the father of two, feel like following their example. I go inside, as eager for my wife's kiss as ten years ago. In a word, Karen and Arevik were in love, and their love became a good example to us all, beginning with me and ending with Old Vano.

In winter Karen and Arevik would meet in our downstairs hallway. They would bid each other farewell late at night.

"Well, I'd better be going. Kiss me goodnight," Arevik would say.

"I'll see you home," Karen would reply and kiss her.

"You'll catch cold, darling." Arevik's voice was very tender. "Don't."

"Won't you catch cold?"

They'd begin to argue. Then Karen would see her home, looking downcast and chilled to the bone when he returned. No one ever had a bad word to say about them.

"It's a pleasure to see them together," Auntie Yeranui said.

Karen's mother was very happy about his choice. "You won't find another girl like her in town," she said, looking at her future daughter-in-law. Then her mother's heart got the upper hand and she added, "My Karen is a very fine boy."

She was right.

The young couple's happiness was nearly shattered twice, but each time love conquered all.

Spring had come. Arevik discarded her coat, and once again it seemed that a bit of the blue sky was skipping across the earth. It seemed that spring had carried off Sarian's palette, and that is why the earth was a riot of colour.

Karen was born in the spring. I know that Arevik was also born in the spring. I don't know it for a fact, but I guess this is so, because spring cannot but be born in the spring. Of this I am convinced.

The whole house always celebrates Karen's birthday. Each apartment sends its representative to take part in the festivities. Naturally, Arevik was the happiest of all.

When the rejected Karo sang his favourite "Laugh, clown, laugh" aria, Arevik applauded louder than anyone else. Then Karo sang again. And when they played the "Swallows' Waltz", Karo asked Arevik to dance. They danced on through the evening.

The next day everyone was talking about Karo having taken Arevik home the night before and having told her of his love. No one knew who had found out about it, but one thing was clear: the girl had listened to him kindly and, upon parting, had said with a smile, "Au revoir, Karo-Canio!"

The sensational news caused many heated arguments and much criticism in our yard.

"Tsk, tsch," Auntie Yeranui clucked. "You mean to say she's just like all the other pretty girls?"

With much shouting and gesticulation the news was finally conveyed to Old Vano. Strange as it may seem, he was not in the least surprised.

"The girl is a looker," he said slowly. "Such beauty is too much for just one fellow."

The young people laughed, for they had thus discovered that Old Vano was a believer in free love.

Karen still whistled "Marina", though Arevik did not come around any more. No one was troubled by her absence now. She had betrayed Karen, so why worry about her? Still, a cloud of sadness hung over the yard.

Karo stopped singing his aria. He didn't come out onto his balcony any more, either. If he did chance to, Auntie Yeranui would give him one of her scathing looks and say, "I always knew he'd steal another fellow's girl. He has the face of a thug."

"He's a fine fellow. And the girls like him. I envy him," Old Vano replied.

"What's so fine about him? He's betrayed his friend!"

"Still," Old Vano said significantly.

“Karen!”

It was Arevik. We all rushed out onto our balconies. Once again our eyes lit up with joy. Then Karen ran downstairs, whistling “Marina”. Slipping his arm through Arevik’s, he dashed off along the roads of love, taking his precious bit of sky with him.

“I can’t understand it,” Old Vano said.

“What can’t you understand?” Auntie Yeranui shouted at him. “She’s jilted Karo!”

“Yes, she’s a good girl,” Vano said, changing his views instantly. “Praised be her parents.”

Karo locked himself in his room and sang away, grieving over Canio’s sorrow. The neighbours asked Karen if it was true that Karo had wanted to abduct the girl. Karen said it was. He was calm, there was no anger in his voice when he spoke of Karo, but he did not offer any more information on the subject. However, he was very proud of his Arevik.

“Do you think I’m the only one who’s in love with Arevik? She gets so many proposals she barely has time to refuse them all.”

Karen was happy and we all rejoiced.

Suddenly, danger threatened again.

Arevik’s parents refused to consent to their marriage. Her father, a professor, didn’t even want to speak about it. He told Karen’s parents that he had no intention of marrying off his daughter, and if he ever did, it would not be to a cobbler’s son.

“You’re taking on too much,” he said to Karen’s father. “Don’t bite off more than you can chew.”

Everyone in the house was angry and indignant.

“I’d like to know why her father can’t see farther than his nose,” Auntie Yeranui said.

“He’s near-sighted. He’s clinging to his petty-bourgeois views,” Old Vano concluded.

“Karen!”

Morning had just dawned. The tenants of the house poured out onto their balconies half-dressed. It was Arevik. She was standing below and smiling. What a bright, sunny day that was! Arevik had a large suitcase and a bundle. Her

eyes were determined. They shone with love that had withstood all assaults.

Karen ran downstairs, whistling “Marina”. Then the two of them climbed back upstairs happily. Karen’s mother greeted them at the door, “Arevik! My sunshine!”

Arevik belongs to us now. She is a member of our large family of neighbours. We are glad of our acquisition, of our treasure. Arevik’s rippling laughter has drowned out Canio’s hoarse lament. This bit of blue sky is now high up on the fifth floor, right under the sky.

“She has found her home,” Auntie Yeranui said.

“Love is eternal,” said Old Vano. “Love is stronger than death. That’s what Maxim Gorky said.”

Yes, love is stronger, but only for those who are strong themselves.

How you’ve changed, girls. Honestly, you have. And, you know, the world changes with you. Even eighty-year-old Vano, half-deaf and quite a wreck, has changed.

How you’ve changed....

*THE GIRL WHO LOOKED
FOR ME*

I was walking aimlessly along the street when someone called, "Ruben!"

A girl ran up to me. She was small, very young, all of two years younger than I, and there was something very childish about the expression of her pretty face. I certainly knew her, but from where? Who was she?

"Why, Ruben," she chattered, grabbing hold of my hand and squeezing it like a child would. "You can't imagine how long I've been looking for you!"

"Hello," I said, trying in vain to recall her name.

"I've been here for five days, and I'm leaving today. Isn't that a shame? But it's not my fault. Honestly. I asked all the girls where you were and how I could find you, but no one knew."

Indeed, I must know her, and we had not seen each other for quite a while. How could I have forgotten her so completely? After all, I didn't know that many girls. This one was certainly nicer than any other girl I knew. How could I have forgotten her?

"Tell me all about yourself," she said. "How've you been? What are you doing now? Are you still as crazy as ever, or have you got any smarter? I'm so sorry I'm leaving in two hours."

She spoke as if we had been very close and was so sweet and sincere that my first impulse was to embrace her. Had I been in love with her? And couldn't I be in love with her again? She was certainly a girl you could fall in love with. And I didn't even know her name! How could I ask her her name without offending and hurting her? Besides, what would that give me? Nothing. Well, then, let everything remain as it was. Perhaps, in the course of our conversation, she would say something that would bring it all back. But she wasn't speaking about herself, she was only interested in me and in what I had to say.

"Say something, Ruben. I see that you really have changed. In the old days you would have rattled off a thousand words a minute. You know, I liked you better that way. Can't you be your crazy old self again? Oh," she stopped. "Maybe I've disrupted your plans. Were you on your way someplace?"

"No, not at all," I said hastily.

"Forgive me for pouncing on you like this. I never would have if it had been anyone else. Here, let me take your arm. Now, don't take such big steps, try to walk in step with me."

I tried and I could, though it was a bit awkward.

Nothing, absolutely nothing, was coming back to me!

I had to say something. What could I talk about? If only I had a hint about the things we used to talk about, if only I knew whom I was talking to!

Well, she'd asked me to tell her about myself. I would have to, I had no other choice. But this meant I would learn nothing about her. I was just deciding on a topic when she stopped.

"Oh, I've got to drop in and see one of the girls for a minute. Wait for me here. Now don't disappear. I'll be right back."

She went through the gate. There was a large house facing the street, but the entrance was in the yard. Besides, there were several small houses in the yard. If only I knew which one she had entered. I could come by the next day and ask them who the girl was that had visited them the day before. I knew it was stupid, because I didn't even know which house she had entered.

Ten minutes passed and she had still not returned. Perhaps she was just a figment of my imagination? The result of one beer too many? But she had seemed so real.

Twenty minutes passed. I became convinced that there had been no girl, that I had imagined the whole encounter. I cast a last glance at the house, sighed and slowly walked off. I didn't really care where I was going, but I headed in the direction we, that is, I had come from. I was probably trying to return to reality.

"Ruben!"

I spun around. The girl was hurrying after me.

"So you wanted to sneak off, did you?"

"No, no," I said guiltily. "I was just walking up and down." What a relief that she was real!

"Come on, Ruben. I won't keep you long. I spent too much time at my girl-friend's house, and I have to hurry now. I haven't even packed."

We stopped at the corner. She was about to say something, but noticed an approaching bus. "Look! There's my bus. No, don't see me off. Someone might see us together and tease me. After all, I haven't gone out with anyone these five days, and here I am at the last moment, seen with a young man. Take care of yourself, Ruben dear."

Just before she hopped on the bus she turned and shouted, "Do write! You know the address. If I don't hear from you first I shan't write either."

I was about to dash in after her but the doors closed in my face. This was also the end of a small mystery in my life, one which I have never been able to solve.

The girl rode off. I never saw or heard from her again. Thus has she remained in my memory, never to be forgotten, yet completely unknown to me.

Many years have passed. True love entered my life. I have known many wonderful women, but at times I wonder whether the girl who looked for me was not the best of all. Perhaps that would have been the one great love of my life. It might also have not been, but this state of not knowing makes me wonder. One thing is clear: I am still looking for the girl who looked for me.

Where are you? Please don't be angry with me for not having written. I had forgotten your address, forgotten your name, forgotten you. I know this is insulting, but it is true. After all, didn't you say I was crazy? So forgive me my insanity for having forgotten a girl like you. I have been punished soundly by not having been able to forget you again for the rest of my life.

You were kind and sincere, and that is why I say: now or in the future, no matter what, remain just as you were then. And if you suddenly chance to see me in the street, call my name again. This time I will not be silent, this time I will tell you a thousand interesting things, but first I will ask the girl who looked for me:

"Who are you?"

THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

Everyone said he was a great poet.

Had he believed in God his confessor would have told him the story of Hell and the tale of Mary Magdalene. But he was not religious. Moreover, he considered self-sacrifice to be stupid. Besides, he was manly, as the girls who kept company with him believed, this thick-lipped youth with the large, sensuous mouth and wavy black hair. His best feature were the dark, languishing eyes that conquered at a glance. He never wore a tie, for they are not worn in the mountains, and he never followed the latest styles.

The girls called the neat university students “pressed pants”, but they called Pargev-Aramazd with his smouldering black pipe and ready supply of dirty jokes which he did not hesitate to tell even in his mother’s presence a cave-man.

He surprised everyone. However, the young women were not surprised. They simply fell in love with him.

“The sixth commandment is: commit adultery.”

But what did a fisherman and a carpenter know of life when 2,000 years ago they composed their holy writings while Mary Magdalene lived closeby?

Asmik was a Madonna. Gegam said that Asmik would one day give birth to a new Christ and that this Christ would put an end to our civilisation, after which the first monkey would again invent the axe in order to begin a new society of creators of atomic rockets.

Each generation interprets Judgement Day in its own way.

Asmik was a Madonna. She saw the black pipe, the wavy hair, the dark, languishing eyes that conquered at a glance and did not succumb to them. Her girl-friends were indignant, while the boys said scornfully, “Asmik? What good is she? It’s strange to see her walking, talking or laughing.

She only cried once in her life and that was when she stepped on a nail."

Everyone believed that nature had wasted its efforts in making her so pretty, since she didn't even notice Pargev-Aramazd. He, however, did notice her. He noticed her because Asmik was the saddest and most attractive of the girls. But chiefly because she seemed to be blind: though she looked at him, she didn't see him.

"Let's go to the theatre."

Asmik's eyes flashed.

"Come on, let's go. I'm feeling depressed today."

"Do you only go to the theatre when you feel depressed?"

"No. I didn't mean that."

"What about Jemma?"

"She's become a bore."

"Haven't I yet?"

"We don't really even know each other," Pargev said and smiled.

"Do you want us to?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You're new, you're pretty, and I don't know what you're like yet."

"Then I certainly won't go."

"Yes, you will."

Everyone was amazed when Asmik finally consented.

A Georgian actor was playing with the troupe that evening, and half the city went to see a Georgian Othello strangle an Armenian Desdemona.

He strangled her as Desdemona is usually strangled, and Pargev was surprised at Asmik's emotional reaction.

"Let's go to a cafe," he said as they were leaving the theatre.

"Wasn't it a wonderful performance?"

"Anything is nice if you're along."

"Why? I've hardly said a word."

"Who cares? Let's go to a cafe. That's what I want."

"Then I don't."

"Oh, come on."

Three lacquered heads rushed over to them the minute they entered, and three schoolgirls were thus made famous: Pargev-Aramazd deigned to give them his autograph. From

that moment on their autograph books became historical documents.

The three coiffures departed.

"I see you're very popular," Asmik said with a wry smile.

"I write well. The Armenians will finally have a good poet."

"No, they won't."

"What do you mean?"

"They won't. You're not really inspired, you're simply in love with yourself and your intelligence."

"That means I'm intelligent."

"Oh yes, you are, and talented too."

"Then what's lacking?"

"I don't know."

"Was anyone ever in love with you? I'm not asking whether you were ever in love. But you must have at least had a crush on one of your teachers."

"No, I've never been in love, and I don't see what that has to do with anything. Bottoms up!"

"We live to love," Pargev said irrelevantly. "We write poetry, and for over two thousand years we Armenians have lived to love."

"Well, love then."

"Whom?"

"Me."

Pargev laughed. "I would, but you'll reject me. Mary Magdalene's more to my taste. You're the Madonna."

"I know. They even say that I'll give birth to a new Christ," Asmik said and laughed. Then she signalled to the waiter. "A glass of cognac for my husband."

The waiter retreated. Pargev put down his drink in obvious confusion.

"What did you say?"

"Can't you drink a glass of cognac?"

"Sure I can."

"I'll pay. There's nothing to be embarrassed about. After all, we're both students."

The waiter returned. "Excuse me, but I forgot to ask which brand you prefer."

"My husband only drinks the best."

Pargev was staring at her in disbelief.

"Don't stare, it's not polite," she said and laughed.

"This is getting interesting."

"There are other interesting things as well. We'll get married during our January break."

"Do you know how many wives I'd have had if I'd have married all of them?"

"But you will marry me. I'm different."

As they rose to leave Asmik said, "Goar is more beautiful than I and Nazik is much sweeter. You don't look good with a pipe, and you don't really know how to smoke it. Don't any more."

The next morning Pargev kept thinking about Asmik. And the more he thought about her, the more infuriated he became. He glanced at his reflection as he passed a mirror. His pipe was indeed becoming. Asmik was wrong. He set off for the university, smoking his pipe as usual. Professor Lalaian stopped him in the corridor.

"I've read your book, young man, and I like it."

"Thank you."

"There's nothing to thank me for. You'll be a real poet if you don't become conceited."

"What?"

"Never mind. There's the bell for your next class."

During the break between classes Asmik said, quite unexpectedly, "Let's go to visit my aunt this evening."

"What for?"

"She's old-fashioned. She said that until she sees my fiancé she won't consent to our marriage."

"Stop it!"

"Are you smoking that pipe again?"

"Who's to stop me?"

"If you keep on smoking I won't marry you."

"Stop it, I said!" Pargev said angrily.

"Don't be cross. I told you about it yesterday."

Strange as it may seem, they did meet that evening.

"Everyone thinks you're a Madonna."

"Everyone's wrong. Your collar's dirty."

"What's it to you?"

"It's my duty to look after my husband."

"I don't understand your jokes."

"I'm not joking at all. I'm very serious."

"But I"

"Love me."

"I can't force myself to."

"Don't. Just ask your heart. I take my words back. We won't go to my aunt's house."

The keys to Sarik's place jingled in Pargev's pocket.

"Come on."

"Where to?"

"Just come on."

"I was joking. I don't have an aunt in Yerevan."

"That doesn't matter. Let's go."

Asmik sat down on the bed. The skirt of her cotton dress rode up a bit.

"So you say we'll get married," Pargev said in a hoarse voice.

"Not any more."

He suddenly kissed her, then recoiled.

"I won't consummate your marriage here," she said and smiled.

"Then why did you come?"

"You're spoiled. Everything comes too easy for you. Let's go"

"You're not going anywhere."

"Don't be silly. You know very well that I'm leaving. And you can see me back to the dorm."

Pargev experienced every emotion except love: anger, surprise and hurt.

"Don't be offended," Asmik said and suddenly embraced him. "No one ever loved you before. They deceived you and you thought that you were deceiving them. Take me home."

Strangely, his first real poetry was born that night. It was a poem about an unusual and rather hateful girl.

His friends were at a loss: Pargev-Aramazd's pipe suddenly disappeared, and his shirts were always clean now.

Naturally, they did not marry then. He was to spend many more hours standing under her dormitory window; he was to propose again and again on a bench in the square. And when Pargev-Aramazd finally learned to wear a tie he became just like everyone else. Asmik alone thought differently. She thought differently and was happy.

THE WHITE LAMB

The old gardener Navasard went down to the spring that welled up under the nut tree to wash and to rest. No sooner had he bent down to let the cool water splash on his sunburned face than he heard the team leader calling him. "Hey, Navasard! Hurry! Your son Arshak is back!"

"What?" the old man said excitedly and then straightened up with difficulty. He rushed back up to where the man was standing with an agility surprising for his years. "What did you say? When did he come? Where is he?"

"He's in the village. I saw him myself. He's driving a blue sedan, riding through the village. Lucky you, Navasard! God has blessed you with a fine son!"

The sun began to shine ten times as brightly as before. Navasard felt he was walking on air. His heart pounded from excitement.

Navasard seemed to be pondering over something as he looked in the direction of the village. But then he turned sharply and ran towards the winepress instead.

He had not seen Arshak for ten years. Each year he would look at the road hopefully, and wait. He had waited patiently. And now, at long last, he would see him. Arshak had come at a good time: the fruit in the orchards had ripened, and he was still hale and hearty.

Navasard had no living relatives left in the village. His had not been a happy life. He had never had any children of his own, and his wife had died many years before. His brother and sister-in-law had both died of hunger during the war, leaving an only son, Arshak.

Navasard picked up the spade that lay on the ground by the edge of the ditch and began to dig. The earth was moist

and smelled of wine. He extracted a small jug he had buried ten years before and was pleased at the touch of the cold earthenware vessel. Sniffing the delicate aroma of the wine, he smiled and said to himself: "It's turned into lion's milk." Then he recalled that the largest of the watermelons had ripened under the huge mulberry tree by the river bank. He cut its stem, wiped the silvery dust from the melon with the hem of his long jacket and admired its shiny stripes.

"My Arshak loves watermelons," he mumbled. He got down on his knees, put his arms around the melon and squeezed hard, with his ear to the rind. He nodded approvingly at the sound. He then went over to the fig tree, climbed it with difficulty and began picking the honey-sweet fruit that had been pecked at here and there by birds. He chose the best figs and packed them gently into a bright woven basket.

Then Navasard set out along the bank to where a six-months-old white lamb was grazing. He was saving the lamb for a special occasion.

"Arshak has come home. I've finally lived to see the day," Navasard said to himself and untethered the lamb. It bleated loudly.

"Let's go, fellow," Navasard said. "Come on, Arshak's home."

He climbed the steep path to the village. The heavy basket pressed on his shoulders, the wine splashed in the jug, while the meek and gentle lamb either ran on ahead or fell behind him.

"Where are you going so early in the day?" the people he met on the way asked.

"Arshak has come home for a visit," the old man replied proudly.

On the way each tree and bush, each stone and spring reminded him of Arshak's childhood. Many were the times that he had carried the child up the steep path on his back. He would sit down to rest on this stone. Navasard would give Arshak a pear and would wipe his nose with the hem of his long jacket. There was the spring which Arshak liked to drink from. Navasard would cup his hands and Arshak would drink from them. Here was the small orchard. The trees still bore fruit abundantly and stayed green far into

the autumn. When Arshak was seven he had fallen from that cherry tree and had broken his leg. Navasard had carried him the many miles to the doctor in the distant settlement.

Then Navasard thought of all the things he had sold to outfit Arshak for city life when he had sent the boy off to study. It had been a long stretch, but Arshak had graduated from the university and had then gone on to study in Moscow. He had risen high in the world.

Navasard would often tell his fellow-villagers about the very important work Arshak was doing in the capital, about his grand car and also that he lived in the biggest house in Moscow.

The old man was in a hurry to reach the village. The wine splashed in the jug, and the meek and timid lamb followed on his heels.

He finally reached his house, but did not see Arshak's car outside. "Why didn't he drive right up?" Navasard wondered. "Ah, what am I talking about. The gravel's too sharp here. He was probably afraid he'd ruin his tires. It's a good thing he didn't drive up to the house."

His one-storey flat-roofed house with a terrace and an earthen floor was like an eagle's nest stuck onto the mountain slope, one among many others.

Navasard entered the yard, set the jug and basket on the ground, tossed an armful of grass to the lamb and looked about. For the first time in his life the house looked pitiful and decrepit to him.

"Well, it's Arshak's house, too. This is where he grew up. He won't be ashamed of his own house," he said to console himself and began clearing the yard.

"Congratulations, Navasard. Arshak's come back." It was the old neighbour woman, looking over the fence.

Navasard flushed with joy. "Thank you. And may your wanderer return as well."

"I saw Arshak."

"Was he here?"

"No. I went to the shop for a package of needles and saw him standing out in front of the farm office. What a fine boy he is. You'd never say he wasn't a shah's son. I just couldn't take my eyes off him. May the Lord bless you."

"Thank you," the old man said in a voice that was thick

from emotion. He went about tidying up the yard with zeal.

First he swept up the dirt: "I don't want my boy to dirty his shoes." Then he hammered in a protruding nail with a rock: "Arshak might catch his sleeve on it and tear his jacket."

Navasard opened the door. A cot stood forlornly against the bare wall. "I'll say, 'Remember how you slept on this bed, Arshak, and I slept here, on the floor?'" he was thinking aloud as he smoothed the cover. "I'll say: 'This is your old bowl, the one you ate from. Look, Arshak, this is your wooden spoon. Remember the day I bought it from the wood-carver Manas, and you were angry, because there was no design on it? And then I took it to the artist and had it painted for you?'"

Conversing thus in thought with Arshak, he set out for the spring, brought back some water and sprinkled the yard, the terrace and the floor inside. Then he began to sweep.

Once again the old neighbour woman's head appeared over the fence.

"Navasard, do you know that Arshak has gone over to the chairman's house?"

"No. When did he go there?"

"Just before you got back."

"He must have seen there was no one at home and gone over there to rest up. He'll be along, he won't get lost."

"Of course."

Navasard brought some kindling wood and stacked it by the outdoor fireplace. Then he took his knife from his belt and went over to the lamb. At the last moment he changed his mind. "I'll wait till Arshak comes," he decided and looked in the direction of the chairman's two-storey house. "What's keeping him? It'll be dark soon. The figs will spoil, the cornel will lose its taste."

He took the fruit from the basket and laid it on the windowsill. Then he borrowed a new tablecloth from the neighbours, covered the table, shook out the rug, covered the couch and put a pillow on it.

Everything was now ready. Still, Arshak had not come. "What's the matter! Why did he go to the chairman's house?" Navasard wondered irritably and a tremor passed through his hands. He hurried to console himself, however,

saying, "Arshak is an important man. He had to drop by and ask the chairman about how things are in the village. And what's the rush, anyway? I'll have him all to myself for a couple of days. I won't let him out of my sight. We'll make up for lost time."

The sun was setting, but still Arshak had not come home. The old man's anxiety mounted. There was a moment when he was about to set out for the chairman's house, but then he changed his mind.

He went out into the yard and called to his neighbour's grandson.

"Run over and see what Arshak is doing. Tell him I'm at home and waiting for him," he said.

The boy was back in no time.

"Well? Did you see Arshak?"

"Yes."

"What's he doing?"

"Drinking wine."

"Did you tell him that I'm home?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'All right.'"

Navasard repeated the words to himself. "Well, then, that means he'll soon be home. I'll start the fire for the *shashlyk* meanwhile."

He soon had a good fire going in the fireplace. Then he set to cleaning the skewers. He went back into the house, wiped the dust off the lamp and sat down at the table to wait.

Time dragged on endlessly. The lights went on in the village, and the houses took on a cozy look. The street noises were dying down. Soon the only sound was that of dogs barking mournfully in the distance.

Arshak had still not returned. The fire died down, leaving a mound of ashes in the fireplace, while the lamb lay on the grass, chewing its cud. Navasard was all ears as he peered into the darkness. His eyes became strained and started to tear, his head felt heavy. He rose, but his feet refused to budge. "Why should I go begging to him? I'm older than he is. He should come to me," he began to grumble, but then consoled himself once again by saying, "Well, he's an important man. Maybe he has some important

business to discuss with the chairman. He'll certainly come home in the morning."

But still, he waited. He waited far into the small hours. The autumn night was drawing to a close. The old man's eyes grew dim from peering intently into the darkness. He was gradually overcome by slumber. Navasard fell asleep as he was, sitting at the table.

He did not know how long he had slept. He was awakened by the neighbour woman's voice calling from the yard. He opened his eyes and was surprised to see the first rays of the sun peeping into the window.

"Navasard! Hey, Navasard!" the neighbour called.

He rushed out of the house. His neighbour was looking over the fence. "How come you've slept so late today?"

"What is it? Is Arshak on his way here?"

"No," she said and shook her head. "Your Arshak is leaving. Look at the road."

Navasard felt as if the roof had come down on his head. He ran over to the low shed and climbed to the roof. Arshak's car was speeding along the road, glittering in the sun, quickly becoming smaller and smaller.

His unsteady gait was that of an old man. Navasard was making his way down the path to the orchards. His eyes that stared at the ground seemed to have become sunken, his back seemed more stooped than ever. The white lamb gamboled after him.

*THE SWALLOWS
WERE FLYING LOW*

1

He was gone again. Since he wasn't at home, it meant he was out in his boat. It was difficult to say which his real home was: this boat or the house where his wife was always waiting for him, where there was a soft bed and everything he could wish for.

"Didn't he say when he'd be back?"

After a long silence in which one sensed her hostility towards everything connected with her husband, she said with pride and pain: "I don't know. I don't know a thing. Does time exist for a crazy man? He's been gone for three days now."

"What about Tsula?"

"I don't know.... I've had no word of my girl." Tears sprang to her eyes.

"Goodbye, Anastasia," I said and ran out into the street. I ran towards the cliffs and slowed down on the beach. I had on a pair of torn old shoes, and it hurt my feet to run on the pebbles.

The sky was a brilliant blue. The sea, too, was clear and blue. It seemed motionless. I was bursting from an irrepressible desire to shout at the top of my voice.

The beach was studded with the hulls of abandoned and, therefore, foreboding-looking boats, but my uncle's boat was nowhere in sight.

The air was filled with the smell of melons. I sat down to shake the sand out of my shoes, but not before I had found a flat stone and flung it so as to make it skip over the surface. But I failed. The stone sank the moment it hit the water. For no reason at all I began to cry.

"Hey, you wretch!" Parpa¹ Yeorghi shouted. He had come out to the very edge of his dilapidated Fresh Fish Tavern which was built on piles over the water and was now looking at me and laughing.

"Where's Levon?" I asked.

"You mean that crazy fellow?"

"You're crazy yourself!"

"Stop shouting, nobody's deaf. Or are you ... uh, nuts, too?"

"Where's Levon?"

"All right, take it easy. If the sharks haven't eaten your uncle he's sure to come back."

"When?"

"God knows."

"I'm serious."

"Take it easy. What's the matter with you anyway? The two of you should be tied up and taken you-know-where. To hell with him, he's lived his life, but you're a kid. What do you want to hang around him for? You should be at school."

"I love him. And I'm sorry for him," I said and began to cry again.

"As God may witness, you're missing some screws, too."

I didn't speak to Parpa Yeorghi after that, but kept looking out to sea. The banks here were unfamiliar, and I gazed at them enchantedly, trying to make out the islands in the distance. There were the Prince Islands, and Gnaly. I couldn't see Purkaz, it was hiding, and there was Geipeli, sticking up out of the water like a nymph. The sails in the distance were like a curtain, but fifty feet away there were seagulls, swarms of gulls. Restless, anxious swallows arched like bows swooped overhead.

In an instant—I was mad!—everything had changed, everything was singing and laughing. And a song of the sea, of the blue, of the endless, magical blue, rose up and rejoiced within me.

I spun around several times.

"Have a look at this little fool," Parpa Yeorghi said.

Then, as suddenly as if someone had given me a push, I flung my arms round his neck and kissed him on the cheek.

¹ *Parpa*—uncle (Greek).

"It's as clear as day," he muttered into his moustache. "First he weeps, then he laughs, then he wants to kiss everybody. I'll swear there's something of that Levon in you."

"I'm spending the night here, Parpa! Mother let me. Do you hear?"

"What about school?"

"School's out now. And I love the sea, and the sky, and you, and freedom!"

"Well, then, I'll put some fish on the fire for you and charge it to Levon. The vodka's on the house."

"Have you heard anything about . . . Tsula? Have you, Parpa?"

Some crows flew by, cawing loudly.

He looked at me, and tears welled up in my eyes again.

"Ho, my boy, are you looking for Levon or Tsula?"

I did not reply.

"No, there's been no news of Tsula. After, eh, what happened Levon's become completely . . . here Parpa tapped his finger on his temple.

The accursed crows. What had got into them?

"But where's he gone to?"

"He took a tripod, a pot, a rod, six bottles of vodka, some bread and cigarettes. All he had on was a shirt and shorts. And you say he's not mad. You'd think he was going to visit his mother. He's probably on some deserted island, enjoying life. That is, if he didn't drop dead. Just think: he's left his business, closed his shop and taken up fishing. Is that how a normal man behaves? If you're a carpenter, that's what you do. And love your wife. He was crazy about her. He took her off the boat when she was on her way back to her homeland, and he married her. And now, not a day passes that he doesn't beat her. What did you take her off the boat for, you wretch? Who forced you to? That's what you wanted. You married her of your own free will. And now you've ruined both your lives. He drinks and spends his days at sea, and there she is, waiting for him, worrying. Who ever heard of such a thing: a man has a good trade and then . . . If I were your father, my boy, I'd give you a sound thrashing and tell you stay clear of these parts. Hear me? Wait a minute! I'll bet you're mooning over Tsula. Here's another one! Why didn't I guess that sooner? Well, well! Listen, sonny, run along home. To hell with all of

them. She's a bit touched in the head, too. It's been a year now. Who knows what son-of-a-bitch has got a share...

"Shut up, Parpa Yeorghi!" I shouted.

"I understand. Why didn't I guess it sooner? He really is love-sick. All the signs point to it. Yes, I must be getting old. I've forgotten what's it like."

"Oh, Parpa," I all but moaned, "I told you I came to find Levon."

He glanced at me sideways and said, "I'll go put the fish on. The vodka will warm you up. And then I'll give you some special grass to chew to kill the smell, so's your mother won't find out."

"I told you I've come to spend the night. Mother knows I'm here."

"What if Levon doesn't come back today?"

"I'll wait for him."

"No, my boy, I don't think you should. Fresh for the morrow, is my advice. Come back tomorrow."

"I'll wait for him right here!"

"You are crazy!"

"Leave me alone, Parpa. Where's the fish?"

"I don't think you'll want it now."

"Why not?"

"Have a look." He pointed out to sea. "Isn't that him?"

"Yes! It is!" I cried and skipped down to the water's edge.

"Uncle Levon! Hey, Uncle Levon! Hey, there!"

Parpa Yeorghi chuckled as he watched me.

A short while later I was proudly marching along beside Levon, carrying a line of fish over my arm, heading towards his house. My uncle carried his rods. His step was firm and broad.

"Go on in, boy," he said when we had reached the house. "You're just in time. We'll set out together tomorrow, God willing. What do you say?"

What could I say? That this was a cherished dream? Or could I tell him how long it had taken me to talk my mother into letting me go fishing with him?

He fixed his reddened eyes on me and said, after a pause, "You're crazy, too, and nothing good will come of you, either, my boy. You'll never amount to anything, my boy. You're just like me. Exactly like me. A copy of me, only smaller. And younger."

The sound of fat crackling in a pan filled the dining room where we sat and from where Uncle directed the cooking.

"Don't you clean the fish, Anastasia!"

"Lord," she moaned, "who ever heard of anyone eating fish with the insides still in? It's a curse on me."

"What do you know about anything?" Levon shouted. "You're supposed to eat fresh-caught fish whole. Damn you! Don't you dare clean that fish!"

"You'd think you'd watch your tongue with the boy here. Don't curse in the child's presence."

"This child will be a man tomorrow. I mean a real man, one who knows how to curse well to begin with." Levon got a handful of my hair and drew my head close. "Come on, let me see your chest."

"Don't, Uncle," I said, confused and embarrassed.

"Let's see!" he ordered and pulled up my shirt. "There's nothing to be ashamed of. Look, Anastasia, I said we had a real man here. Even though he's still a kid, his chest is full of hair. That's a man for you! I said this child would be a man tomorrow. When you grow up and have button shirts, your hair will show at the neck, for one thing. Then you'll learn to curse, as a man should, my boy. And, finally, mark my words carefully, you have to learn to take everything that life offers. And never hesitate about it. Enjoy every moment. If only you knew, my boy, how little of life there is for this, how short it is, good God. ..."

"What a way to talk to a child! If his mother only knew," Anastasia said and sighed.

"It's none of your business. That's what our boys should be like. I'm talking about our Armenian boys, not the Greek boys. You can worry about them," he said and winked at me.

Then he began setting the table. He set out the wine glasses, opened a bottle of vodka and sliced some tomatoes and onions. He was in high spirits.

"Anastasia! Where's the salt, my pet?"

His wife served the fish.

We took our places, he rolled up his sleeves and attacked the food.

"One would think you hadn't eaten for forty days," Anastasia grumbled.

I stared open-mouthed at my uncle.

"Eat," he said to me. "Eat. I told you: never hesitate to take the joys life offers. Grab them, and don't waste time on thinking about it, for God's sake. If you've found something, take it. And never refuse anything. Now fresh-fried fish with vodka and onions, that is, if you eat it with your hands, hear, only with your hands, is also one of life's joys."

"Look at him," Anastasia interrupted. "Not a care or a trouble in the world. As if he had no wife, and as if nothing had happened to his daughter. All he thinks about is drinking and eating. He's no better than an animal."

Levon's face darkened. He stopped eating. His wife was about to say something else, but at this moment his powerful, hairy hand came crashing down on the table, making the glasses jump and tinkle pitifully. The bottle of vodka tipped over, and the liquid poured out on to the floor with a gurgling sound. Levon's eyes became bloodshot. His wife, sensing what was to follow, spoke hastily: "I didn't know whether you were alive or dead the past three days. To say nothing of my girl, of my Tsula..."

"Shut up!" my uncle bellowed.

I thought it was thunder crashing and lightning exploding over the small fisherman's hut. I dashed into a far corner, terrified of what would follow.

Levon rose.

"Go into your room and go to bed," he said to me. "I'll wake you tomorrow. Go to bed."

I could not disobey. His voice was adamant. I went into the room they gave me whenever I stayed over at their house. It was Tsula's bedroom and was next to their bedroom. When Tsula was still at home and I would stay over, my uncle would always make her sleep in the living room, while I had her room. Uncle always felt that men were better than women.

It was very still. There was a photograph of Tsula on the table. But no sooner had I leaned over to get a closer look at it than I heard a loud slap, followed by Anastasia's scream. Everything within me trembled, yet the strongest emotion of all was curiosity. I put my eye to the keyhole. Then, frightened lest I be discovered at such an ungainly

occupation, I tiptoed away from the door, undressed and got into bed. The impressions of the day had been too much for me. It was as if I had spent the day watching a strange, unfamiliar film in which the scenes were each more terrible than the previous. I don't recall how long I lay there, unable to sleep, when I heard the sound of whispering. My curiosity got the better of me. I sat up in bed and listened. It was Levon's voice, but how it had changed! And the words he spoke were so unusual. They were words of love and sweet desire. The woman beside him, his wife Anastasia, sobbed softly. Then they were silent, and after a while I heard the sound of whispering again. I don't know whether it was a dream or the nightmare of stark reality. This was followed by a fire, everything was burning, and I tried to run, to escape, and could not, my legs buckled, I wanted to scream, but my voice died in my throat. No one could hear me, and the flames were creeping closed and closer.

"What's the matter with you, boy?" My uncle was shaking me. "Did you have a bad dream? Come on, get up, it's time to start out. The sea's waiting for us."

It was the dead of night. I got up and, desirous of escaping from this house as quickly as possible, threw on my clothes. Levon was still washing under the tap. I could hear him splashing over the sink. Bewildered, I stuck my head into their bedroom and saw Anastasia, sleeping peacefully, the covers partly thrown off, with a happy smile on her rosy face.

Tsula's picture was on the floor. I picked it up and put it back on the table, feeling a tug at my heart, for only now did I fully realise that I had slept in her bed.

I was crestfallen and shivering from the pre-dawn cold as I jogged along beside Levon. He, as always, walked on with giant strides, carrying his rods. We soon reached the beach. I was silent and hesitant.

"Push!" Levon said. We pushed the boat into the water. "There she goes!"

Parpa Yeorghi's tavern was lost in the dark. There were boats with blinking lights in the distance.

"Row towards Parpa's place," Uncle said. "We have to get some bait."

We rowed over to the piles under Parpa's tavern. Levon got out his penknife, stuck his hand into the water and

began scraping the snails off the nearest pile. He repeated the operation at every one of the other piles and, having gleaned a considerable number of small and delicate snails, he told me to change places with him.

"We're late, my boy. A man of the sea should have neither a home nor a family and children. These things distract you, they make you forget about everything and keep you from your goal."

Being rather clumsy, I had managed to wet my legs to the knees while pushing off. I sat in the bow, my eyes on my uncle's mighty back and powerful arms. The oars rose and dipped rhythmically, while I kept thinking about what he had said.

"A man of the sea should have neither a family nor children. ..." A man of the sea, a wife, children, love, a goal... But what did love have to do with it? And what goal was he talking about? Parpa Yeorghi really had cause to say that my uncle Levon was slightly crazy.

Still, I felt I was the happiest person on earth just then.

The crows were again cawing loudly.

3

The sun was in no hurry to rise, and the unaccustomed coolness chilled me to the bone. My teeth began to chatter.

"I see you're cold, my boy. So the fur on your chest is of no help, is it?"

"That's all right," I replied, feeling highly insulted.

"Here," he said and handed me a bottle of vodka, having extracted it from a pile of ropes, bait and the anchor. "Have a few sips."

I had about six or seven gulps and felt my stomach become as hot as if I had been drinking fire.

"Now wipe your lips with your fist, like so, and we'll see how the fishing goes today."

Levon had on a pair of shorts. He had pulled his shirt off some time before and now, being practically naked, was rowing swiftly. When we had left the shore a good distance behind, he raised the sail and leaped over to sit beside me, holding the end of the rope in one hand.

"And now onward into the sun and life. Onward, my boy,

always onward! To where they'll understand us, and where we'll find true friends. But what a fool I am. Who am I saying this to, my boy? To a child."

I wasn't offended any longer. I was happy to be sailing along so swiftly. The vodka had warmed me. My head felt foggy, and though I did not understand all my uncle was saying, his words excited me. The thought that somewhere far away I would find true friends and even love excited me. I was beginning to believe this madness and gazed at my uncle with fear and respect.

The boat listed sharply. I began to really fear for my life.

The sail billowed and strained, the wind beat wildly in it, seeking release, and my uncle's hands pulled at the rope with all his might. It seemed as if he were trying to calm a rearing steed that raced us ever onward towards our fate. But this was my imagination playing tricks on me.

"Oho!" my uncle shouted.

There was not a trace of fear in his face. He seemed to be in his element and resembled a fantastic, fairy-tale creature. He licked the salt spray from his lips, shouted words that were unintelligible to me and laughed loudly. I shook with fear and the cold, and he noticed it. He noticed it despite the fact that he was in a state of oblivion and seemed not to see anything at all.

"Don't be afraid, my boy!" he shouted. "I'll set her straight now." He threw his body over the left side, with only his legs remaining in the boat.

This did nothing to improve the situation, and we continued to race along, listing heavily to the right.

"Come over here!" he shouted.

God knows, I was never made for such mad escapades. While I stood up and tried to get my balance in order to take a step, a tall wave crashed over my head, sending me sprawling back into my seat.

"Poor you," Levon said and shook his head.

I, too, was in a state of oblivion, but it was nothing like that experienced by my uncle. The pull of contradictory emotions had finally done me in, and I was dying of exhaustion and awe. I was certain that this was my last hour on earth, that I was living the last minutes of my life.

I don't know how much time elapsed until Levon jerked

at the rope, making the sail shudder and then roll up noisily. In an instant the boat was still. It was hardly moving. Levon made fast the sail. He looked like a victorious warrior: he had won the battle and now the swords were being sheathed and the banners furled until the next battle.

"Get up, my boy," he shouted. "Drop anchor!"

I was still shaking and quite unable to carry out his order. "Come on, get up! What's the matter with you? Is that how a man behaves?"

He picked up the anchor, swung it around his head several times and tossed it five or six metres away from the boat. After making fast some ropes he came over to sit beside me.

He had extracted the vodka bottle again. "Have some," he said. "Though it's probably too much for you. But there's no other choice. This devil's brew can put courage into the last weakling."

He forced me to open my mouth and take a few sips. "Why'd you get frightened? Here I was, thinking you were a real man."

Meanwhile, the sun was rising above the horizon. Its rays warmed and caressed my tortured, suffering body in a new and unaccustomed way. What inexpressible bliss it was!

I heard the whistling of the wind as I raised my face to the sun.

"Let's drink to the sun, my boy. Can you hear the music of the sea? If you feel this moment, if you hear all this and understand it, know that this is life and that there is no other life on earth than this."

I gazed at my uncle and did not recognise him.

We were in the middle of the sea, of the bottomless, endless, vast sea. There was not a soul in sight, not a speck of land. Just the sea, the sun and the two of us. And there was the anchor and the boat, which, perhaps, gave me my only hope of ever returning to shore.

I sat down in the stern, overwhelmed by emotions which I was never again to experience with such shattering force.

Then my "crazy" uncle explained it all from a philosophical point of view. "You're so small, you're like a bear cub. You're a miniature copy of me, just as sincere and truthful. There's much ahead of you: you'll know love and

suffering, you'll dream, and hope of making your dreams come true. Don't you ever think of giving up. No matter what your boat in life will be like, run the wind, catch the wind, even if your sails are tattered. Even if it's a delusion, no matter, you must never abandon your boat and remain on the shore. Always go out to sea and sail into the sun. If you meet your own Anastasia, no matter what happens, love her. And if they take your daughter from you, your Tsula, look for her image in the sun. Ah, but why am I babbling on like this, old fool that I am! You're just a boy and won't understand me anyway."

Look for Tsula in the sun? Yes, I saw her then, sun-radiant, with golden tresses, naked and beautiful, the Tsula of my dreams. I only saw her thus once.

Because there is no such Tsula on earth, Tsula born of the sun.

Meanwhile, my uncle was saying: "The more sailboats in the sea, the more madmen reaching for the sun, the better and more truthful life will be. Believe me."

"I do, Uncle."

He grabbed me in his huge paws, drew me close and kissed my head.

"You're the only one of our entire family who is my heir. And you'll come to know how wonderful life is, my boy." Levon fell silent. His silence was foreboding, it was more terrifying than his eccentric behaviour.

Some swallows flew over us. They were flying so low they nearly brushed us with their wings.

"It's going to rain," Uncle said. "It'll be raining in an hour from now."

He turned to the north and stretched out his hand. "See the rain-clouds? Too bad we don't have a fair wind. We'll have to row back."

"But what about the fish?" I asked, glad in my heart that there was no fair wind.

"It's no use fishing today. It's been grand enough without the fish. Lie down on the bottom. We'll get drenched anyway. I should have foreseen this."

I don't recall how we reached the beach. It was a regular downpour. All I remember is that my body was burning up in a fever. When I opened my eyes I saw my mother and Anastasia bending over me.

"I'll call a cab and take him home," my mother said.

"Where's my uncle?"

"I don't ever want to hear about him again," Mother said angrily.

"Where could he be but at sea? He's been gone two days," Anastasia sighed.

"The swallows were flying very low," I said.

My mother looked at me in horror.

"He's saying the same thing over again, Anastasia. He's delirious. Lord, don't take my boy from me. You've taken Tsula from us, leave us the boy."

I heard all they were saying, but I was too weak to even move a finger.

I was unconscious for several days. Then I began to improve.

My uncle is no longer living. Neither is my mother. I don't know what's become of Anastasia. Tsula finally returned home, having realised that she had been deceived. A man had quite simply taken advantage of the girl's unselfish love, her trust and sincerity. After Tsula returned there were rumours that she had inherited a lot of her father's ways. However, I don't know whether this was true or not.

I don't know. But whenever I see swallows flying low I always think of my uncle Levon, the sea, the sun and life. And when they swoop very low, I feel as happy as a child, for then I think that the sky will now shed its tears over the unknown grave of my uncle, weeping for him. For he had no relatives left on earth save the sky, the sun and the sea. The sky, the sun and the sea.... And, perhaps, the swallows.

Parpa Yeorgi, if you are still living, I want you to know that I respected Levon, that I loved him and, in memory of him, I never deserted my "boat" on the rocks, but, despising all hardships, I always steered it through to the open sea, out into the open sea.

Vardkes Petrosian

GOOD MORNING, JACK

We live on the third floor. My window faces the street, which is both good and bad. It's good, because I can always hear my friends calling me from downstairs. It's bad, because ... there are many reasons why it's bad. The main one is that it's impossible to sleep in the mornings. I'm often awakened at nine o'clock, and sometimes even at eight. If I'm up at eight, it means I can't avoid seeing my father. We usually have the following conversation:

"Good morning, Dad."

"Up so early? Are you sick?"

"No."

"What are you going to do today?"

"The same as tomorrow."

"Which will be?"

"The same as yesterday."

"Don't you think it's about time you found something worthwhile to do?"

"Life is too short as it is. There's no time left to think."

"We can't go on having this same conversation every day."

"I don't intend to get up at eight o'clock every day. One can even listen to the worst tango twice a month."

"That's all you're capable of, cracking stupid jokes."

"Well, I don't think spending your life at the plant is a sign of great capability."

"Shut up!"

Usually, at the words "Shut up!" Mother enters the conversation. "Khachik's here, Artiusha," she says.

Khachik is my father's driver. This means the car is downstairs and our talk is over. I'm lucky, because Father

usually never has time to continue our conversation after we get to the part where I'm to shut up. I'll speak of Mother later. First, about the girl.

It was a usual sort of morning. Mother had just brought me my coffee, and I was about to get up, when a tower crane appeared right in the window. There was a house going up across the street, and this was one of the cranes. But it had never been so close before. The window was wide open. I hoped that the crane would move off and disappear, but it did not. It stood planted there, its long arm dipping and rising. I got bored by the sight and drew the curtains. Just like at the cinema. Whenever there's a landscape with factories in a newsreel, I close my eyes.

However, the crane was still there the next morning. What a nuisance! As usual, I lay in bed, trying to decide whether to get up or not. I was to meet the fellows at one o'clock. What should I do until then? While I was thinking, the crane kept on working, dipping and rising, swooping to the left and the right. What a bore. I rose to shut the window and happened to glance at the cab of the crane. The crane operator was a girl. Yes, a girl. And she was looking straight at me. I darted back into bed, since I was half-nude. I must have looked very funny, because she grinned. What impudence!

I called my mother. She drew the curtains. Then I got up and dressed. The morning was ruined.

The third morning there was the crane, and there was the girl again. I opened the window and decided to wave to her. She waved back. That's when I noticed she was pretty. Well! How come I hadn't noticed that before?

"Hey! Come on down from the sky!" I shouted.

The girl stuck her head out of the glass box and said, "I come down from the sky at five o'clock."

At exactly five I was down on the pavement. She came by at 5:10. I nearly missed her, for she had changed her clothes and was still prettier now.

"My name's Mary," she said.

"Mine's Jack." I didn't tell her my real name. It was a matter of principle. I never told a girl my real name. The main thing was to remember the name I went by with each of them.

She looked at me and smiled. "What now?"

I suggested we go to the cinema.

"I can't. I'm busy this evening."

"Do you have a date?"

"(T)"
I may.

"What about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow's all right."

However, we met several hours later instead. I was standing outside the cinema with the fellows and suddenly saw her.

"Mary?"

"Hello, Jack."

The fellows smirked. Armen said, "That makes twenty-

SIX.

He meant that "Jack" was my twenty-sixth alias. But that didn't matter. Mary did. She half-turned and was waiting for me to come over.

"Where'd you come from?" I asked.

"From where I'm coming."

"What's the book?"

"Arch of Triumph."

"Oh?" I had read something or other by Remarque, but couldn't imagine that a girl who was a crane operator could be interested in literature.

"You're reading it to be able to criticise him, aren't you? It's all the rage now." These were not my own words. That's what Henry had said to me when he had lent me a book by Remarque.

"I like the way he writes."

"Do you like me?"

She took it as a joke.

"Are you a student, Jack?"

I don't know why I said I wasn't.

"Do you have a job?"

"Yes."

"You must work on the night shift, because you sleep late."

A capital idea. Certainly, I'd be on the night shift.

"I'm out for some fresh air before my shift," I said.

"That's the right thing to do." I noticed that there was a change in the way she was looking at me. I took her arm. She did not protest.

"Will you go to the cinema with me tomorrow?"

"All right."

I didn't feel like talking. I looked up at the stars. I think the stars are there not simply to be praised in verse. There were stars long before the first poet was even born, and there will still be stars when, thank goodness, there won't be a single poet left. Stars are probably there to help you think up the next lie for the girl you're with. Just then, however, Mary said, "Don't bother seeing me home. It's too far."

I said nothing. What could I do? I was on my way to "work", wasn't I? She got into a bus while I went off to my imaginary job.

The fellows were still standing around outside the cinema.

"How'd it go?"

"Where'd you dig her up?"

"That was a good pair of legs."

"She's probably a medical student."

I told them who she was. No one believed me at first, but then they all burst out laughing.

"Those legs simply don't go with a tower crane," Armen said.

"Come on, let's shove off," said Tom.

We started down Abovian Street. I graduated from secondary school two years before and, in the last two years, I must have walked up and down this street at least a thousand times. True, it was not much of a pastime, but there was no other choice. There wasn't a single decent place in town where you could get a drink and dance. After all, we couldn't hold parties at each other's houses every night. And so we trudged down the street. Besides, my shoes felt tight. The streets were crowded. I looked at the throng, but saw no one, just as if there were no other people, at least, not as far as I was concerned. I used to like people before. But I'm a changed man. Most of the people seemed superfluous to me. If they didn't exist, it would be easier to get tickets for the cinema, there wouldn't be a crush in the buses, and there wouldn't be so many people asking me why I wasn't working or doing anything useful.

I wasn't listening to what the boys were talking about. I already knew all they had to say, like I knew the sidewalks of Abovian Street. But what was there to do? The tower crane wasn't any better. Everything was so dull. It was even more interesting to look at the stars.

"I bought a new record. Let's go over to my place and listen to it," said Tom.

We went over to his place. Though it wasn't even midnight, most of the windows were dark. Tom turned on his record player. You couldn't see the stars from there, so I listened to the music. It was good. What was that? Someone was knocking. Tom went to open the door.

"There's a sick child downstairs," a voice was saying. "Could you please turn off the music till tomorrow?"

"Till tomorrow." They're used to putting everything off till tomorrow. Why couldn't the child get sick tomorrow?

I started for home.

"Do you ever feel bored?" For some reason or other, that was the first thing I asked Mary the next evening. She looked at me strangely. "Sometimes," she said.

"What do you do then?"

"For example, like now, I'll go to see a film." She looked at me closely again. "Actually, you can do all sorts of things."

My eyes were on the sky now, but it was only seven o'clock. The stars weren't out yet. We went to the cinema. At first, I didn't watch the screen. When the lights went down I wanted to watch Mary. I tried to find her hand in the dark. It was cold.

"Are you cold?" I whispered.

"No," she said, but did not pull her hand away.

"I'll take her to Armen's place," I decided. "He's home alone tonight."

Mary pulled her hand away. "It's too warm," she said.

My eyes were used to the dark by now. I looked at her again. Yes, I would certainly have to take her to Armen's.

"Look at the screen, and take your hand away," Mary whispered. I had to obey.

I always believed you had to give in to a girl in little things, so that she'd give in later.

As we were leaving the theatre I noticed that no one was discussing the film. All Mary said was, "It was a very poor film."

"I want to introduce you to a very jolly crowd," I said. "We can listen to music there, and you won't be bored."

"I've no time to be bored. Besides, you'll be late for work."

Indeed, I had told her I started my shift at ten-thirty.

A militia man whistled.

"We're jay-walking," Mary said. "See? He's pointing at us."

"Ah ... I guess we'll have to do as he says. What's the difference anyway?"

* * *

"Good morning, Jack. How'd the shift go?"

"Fine. I'm a bit tired, though," I replied from my bed.

She waved at me and turned to the controls. The crane's arm was lifting an entire wall. How dull. And I really was tired, for I'd come home very late. We'd had a fine old time, what with the fellows and girls I knew and those I didn't.

We drank and danced and argued. I kissed three or four of the girls and made dates with two of them. One, named Alla, was really pretty. I'd take her over to Armen's this evening. Someone said, "Let's drink to those who know how to live." Then Alla bent over to me so that I could see her bosom in the deep cut of her dress and whispered, "That's our toast." I drank and then, for no good reason, found myself thinking about Mary. Didn't that toast apply to her? Didn't she know how to live? "This is the real life," Alla was saying. I had one arm around her and was holding my drink in my other hand, while, damn it all, I was thinking about Mary. Why wouldn't she chuck that crane of hers? Why couldn't she live the real life? Couldn't a girl with legs like hers find anything better to do than climb half-way up to the sky? Alla was speaking about Remarque's "Arch of Triumph". "I just love the way Ravik keeps on drinking every brand of liquor there is. Not like us."

I was dead drunk when I got home.

I felt like sleeping, but Mary was waving to me. I'd have to get dressed.

I couldn't see Mary now, but I kept looking at the half-built house. When we had moved in, there hadn't been a single house across the street. And look how many there were now. I could hear people talking and the sound of

hammering and clanging coming from Mary's house. This used to irritate me, but now I wanted to know what those people were talking about. I listened closely and caught several words and phrases. Just then I heard Mother saying, "Should I bring your coffee in, dear, or will you come to the table?"

I went to the dining room. In the end, everything was equally dull: drinking coffee and building a house.

It was one o'clock. I had four hours to kill. I set out for the cinema. Tom and Viul were already there. They were leaning against the basalt columns outside. I found myself wondering what they would be leaning against if some people hadn't built those columns.

Everything was a bore.

"Bon jour!" Tom shouted.

"Bon jour!" I replied.

They moved to make room for me. We watched the pretty girls pass. Naturally, there were other people passing by, too, but we never noticed them. We left that to the militia and the poets.

"Look at those hips," said Viul.

The basalt was comfortably warm. Tom yawned and said, "What'll we do tonight?"

"That's no problem," Viul said, indicating a girl who was coming towards us. "I've found my pastime for tonight."

"Bon jour, boys!"

"Bon jour!" we replied.

Viul walked off. We remained. Plain-looking girls and people in general filled the street. I noticed that some seemed happy, others looked sad. There was a man who was mumbling to himself. There was a girl who was crying.

"May I pass, please?"

I was resting one foot against the next column and had blocked the way. It was a young man speaking. He was dressed plainly, and probably hadn't shaved since the previous day. There was a book under his arm.

"Pardon me." Why was I staring at him? I didn't know. I let him pass. He walked on after glancing oddly at Tom and me.

I was hot in my black shirt, but when I complained about it, Tom said it was all the rage in Paris. I asked him how come he knew, and instead of answering he said he had

some new records he had borrowed for a day, and why didn't we go over to his place to listen to them.

"Before the neighbours go to bed," he said and smirked.

I kept wondering about how he could know of the latest Paris styles, but I was too lazy to repeat my question. How dull everything was.

I met Mary at five.

"Will you walk me back?" she said. "And you still haven't told me where you work."

I was caught unawares for a moment. Then my lips said, "It's a military secret."

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

A drunk was coming down the street, grinning at everyone, singing "Moonlit night", though it was still daylight. I watched him and then recalled the girl at the party who had spoken about Remarque.

"I bet all he's had is vodka, poor fool," I said. "Not at all like the characters in Remarque's books, who drink every kind of liquor."

Mary looked surprised. "Remarque isn't a menu. I don't know what they drink, but Ravik is someone I admire greatly." She was suddenly silent, as she had probably run out of words.

The summer evening was descending upon us. We were approaching the cinema. There were the fellows, as usual: Viul, Armen and Tom.

"Bon jour, boy," said Tom.

I barely raised my hand to greet them. It seemed much heavier than before.

"Do you know them?" Mary asked.

"Yes. What of it?"

Mary was looking at me, and I was looking at the pavement that was being polished by endless soles.

"How many hours a day do they spend standing around here?"

"Sometimes the whole day," I said caustically, realising that Mary's question was addressed to me, first and foremost.

"That's a fine occupation," she said in the same tone of voice. "I imagine they've rubbed holes in the columns by now."

Surprised at my own calmness, let my eyes roam over the basalt, trying to see the hole that I had made.

"What do they do?" she asked with animosity.

"They're human beings."

"That's no profession."

"Why not? Maxim Gorky said: the most honoured occupation in the world is being a human being."

Mary laughed. "You'd make a fine defence lawyer for those parasites."

No one had ever called me a parasite before. And why should they have? Is there a law that says everyone has to work?

"Why do you think they're parasites?" I tried not to give myself away and spoke as calmly as possible. I don't like moralists. They'll never let anyone live in peace.

"Are you any worse than they? But you have to go off now and work all night."

Was I any worse than they? Not at all. That was why I did as they did. But you, Mary, have to rush off home to go to bed, for you have to be up at six, so as not to be late for work. And you never stop to think that you'll be late for real living. You'll wake up one day and see that the hands of Time are pointing to eleven p.m. You'll only have an hour left. But I had to make some reply. What should I say?

"Do you find things easy?" I said.

"No."

I had expected her to say she did, that her work was like play. Why had she said it was not?

"Why didn't you go to college?"

"I didn't pass the exams. I took them for the third time a couple of days ago."

"Now what?"

I haven't opened my window for the past three days. I try to sleep more, for this shortens the time left for all sorts of unwonted thoughts. Why does everyone have to work? What if everyone suddenly stopped working? But it was all a bore. These questions lead to a lot of philosophising. I preferred a glass of sparkling red wine.

I went outside. It was hot. Why did I keep glancing back at the other side of the street? Was I looking for Mary? I smiled in spite of myself. It was strange to imagine that this great iron monster was her obedient slave. Mary probably

had her books up there in the cab. I had never seen the town from such a height. All you could see from my third-storey window was the opposite side of the street, which was often covered with loose soil these days. ... I stepped in at a restaurant. It was the time of day when the waiters had nothing to do and so were having their own lunch. The only customer was the heat. Smiles greeted me. I took a seat. I could see the crossing through the window. A girl was selling flowers.

Mary turned on the record player.

I don't know why, but I had been outside our house at exactly five that evening. Mary was waiting for me. I told her the factory had received a new order and that I had hardly had any time off in the past three days, but that I was free tonight.

Now I was at Mary's house.

Her mother was in the next room. Her brother, who was a student, would be back from his field work the next week. I wondered why all this was becoming of interest to me. Someone was playing an unfamiliar melody on a violin.

"Do you like the violin?"

"No."

Mary pouted.

"All right, I like it." I was afraid she'd start preaching again. The melody continued. My heart suddenly lurched. But then the song ended. Mary put on a record.

"Do you want to dance?"

I was just about to yawn when the room suddenly came to life. Imagine, it was that tango Tom had got. Could Mary and Tom like the same things? The saxophone had set Mary's feet tapping out the rhythm. She was smiling.

"Let's dance," I said. "Do you like this? The music, I mean?"

"Yes."

"What about the violin?"

"I like the violin, too."

"Tom certainly would be surprised."

"Who's Tom?"

"Tom?" I forgot what it was I was going to say. "Oh, Tom. He's a fellow I know. He says..."

We kissed. I don't know how it happened. I can't recall. It's as if I'd never kissed a girl before. The record kept on spinning, but I wanted the violin to play its soft, sweet melody again.

"Mother's there. .." Mary whispered.

I kept on kissing her. The thought flashed through my mind that I didn't know a single poem by heart. I recalled that Viul had once really fallen in love and we had made his life miserable. Then I realised that Mary might again ask me where I worked, and my knees felt weak. I walked over to the window and lit a cigarette. Mary said, "Mother must have fallen asleep."

The same pulsating music continued. It was followed by more. But I couldn't dance. I kept looking at the town, which now seemed to me to be a spinning disc, though it was motionless. I imagined Father asking me, "What are you going to do tomorrow?" and I felt I would never again be able to reply: "The same as yesterday."

"Do you really love..."

Mary smiled shyly. She hadn't understood.

"This music?" I concluded.

"Yes."

"They say it's the music of parasites."

"Music has nothing to do with it."

I walked along the street and wished it would never end. It was a short street. I had a lot to think about, but all I could think of was the pulsating music, the violin's lament and Mary's eyes when she said, "Mother must have fallen asleep." How scornfully she had called my friends parasites, and how lovingly she had responded to my kisses. Why hadn't I told her who I was and what I did from the very start? I'm a parasite. Ah, here are the fellows.

"Bon jour, boy!"

I barely nodded.

"Come on."

No one asked where I had been, no one said a word about where we were going. We just were. For the sake of moving. We walked down the familiar street, and I found myself looking at all the passers-by. Was I worse than they? Just because I didn't want to work? But was that so important? What had my father fought in the war for? Why did he spend his days and nights at the plant? And why didn't

anyone say to him: "You've done enough. It's time you really started living."

"We're getting together tomorrow. Bring her along," said Viul.

"The crane operator," Tom added. I nodded. Where had that girl come from? Why couldn't I be myself with her? And why was it so hard to obliterate the last few days from my mind?

"Let's go in," someone said. We entered the restaurant.

*

"Good morning, Jack. How was the shift?"

She wasn't speaking to me from the sky. We were standing on the sidewalk. I had had a bad night and was outside by seven. And here was Mary.

"Why so early?"

"It's hot."

Then she said, "Do you want to climb up into the sky?"

I found the strength to joke.

"Like those dogs Belka and Strelka in the rocketship?"

"No. Only as high as the sixth storey. With me."

I understood. Well, one might as well have one look at life from the sky. It was as dull one place as another.

We entered the yard. People greeted Mary from all sides.

"That a new pupil with you?" someone asked. Mary was looking at me proudly.

"He has pupils of his own. You know where he works?" However, as she said it, she smiled helplessly, because she didn't actually know where I worked. Mary exchanged a few words with someone, and I was allowed to climb up with her. My arms and legs moved automatically. And here was the sky. Below me was my native town. I felt that I had never seen it before. I could see dozens of cranes. They seemed to be waving their arms at me. Those were new houses going up all over. And people. Mary sat down at the controls.

"I'll climb down now. Where do you keep your books?"

"You want to go down? Here, look." Then she showed me where she had hung a little mirror on the iron wall.

"This is my dressing table. You must be tired."

I couldn't help smiling as I looked at the mirror. Mary

said, "I've already built five houses.... I mean, we have," she added quickly, looking down at the street through the glass wall.

Five houses. All I had done in this town was to get born. Nothing else.

* ;J-

A young man came up to us outside the cinema.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Sis."

"I'd like you to meet my brother," Mary said.

"Jack?" He looked at me closely, then offered me his hand. "Mary's told me about you."

"My name is Arsen." I don't know whether I shouted it or whispered it. I found I couldn't breathe the same air as these two who trusted everyone and everything. I did notice that Mary turned pale. Her brother moved his hand away, and it hung suspended in the air like the arm of a tower crane.

"Jack isn't a bad name, either," he said, trying to be courteous. "Jack London is my favourite author. Do you like his work?"

I was forced to say I did, although one should supposedly read a writer's books to know whether one likes them or not.

Mary had not yet regained her composure. She was trying to understand what it was all about, and so said in a barely audible voice, "Let's go in. We'll be late."

"I hope you'll excuse me. I've already seen the film. Besides..."

Mary touched my hand. "You still have plenty of time before your shift."

"I don't work anyplace," I practically shouted. Then added more calmly, "Good luck, Mary."

I made my way through the traffic noises and saw the fellows leaning on the basalt columns.

"Bon jour!" Tom shouted.

"Bon jour!" the others shouted.

But the crowd in the street carried me onward. All I saw were the basalt columns which I knew had been built by people. All I had done in this town was to get born. I looked up. There were the stars. They were shining, but not only so that poets could write about them. They were also there

to look at when one didn't believe in anything any more. Maybe it would be easier to face people and look into one's own heart afterwards. Maybe one would be able to find some stars in one's own soul later.

I've been getting up very early for the past three weeks. I don't meet my father and don't hear Mary calling, "Good morning, Jack. How'd the night go?"

Yes, the night was gone. It was morning now.

IN SEARCH OF A MATE

An ice cap covered the mountain peak. Near the white ice a small cloud was kicking off its swaddling clothes, and under it a skylark trilled. Over the cloud, over the herds, the hawk, the mountains and the woods the clear and blazing winds of other worlds carried along the great, round sun of noonday.

The grass they had come upon was exceptionally good, and the cows knew that the forester would soon be after them for eating the delicious grass, and so they ate greedily. They must have long since eaten their fill, yet the forester had not shown up. A stream took its source in the ice cap. It rushed down the slope and there meandered through the herd. The cows sensed there was a stream nearby. As they ate the grass, their udders swelled with milk, while they kept repeating to themselves that there was a stream nearby.

The buffalo cow grazed in a dell, submerged in the warm depth of its many smells. The winds had not carried off a single one, for they had not reached the hollow. If the herd came here it would trample and dirty the dell, and the buffalo cow grazed and shook her head, and snorted threateningly. Suddenly the grass turned to straw in her mouth. The stream was nearby, but a shiver ran down her spine. That meant the sun had slipped behind a cloud. She tried to brush off the shadow by twitching her skin, but her skin would not respond. As she waited to see what would happen, the blood in her veins slowed down to a trickle and stopped; the world around her became dim, and all sounds were muffled. Then the world stopped and was plunged into darkness, and the skylark, the breezes and the stream stopped in an unbearable state of expectation: the cloud would

now explode. . . . Then the buffalo's veins expanded, and the blood rushed through them in a swift, easy torrent.

She left the dell. The cows that could be seen in the shimmering light of the meadow were handsome, but there was not a single buffalo bull among them. Her blood was becoming hot, her knees ached with the heat and a stinging pain, while her spine stung as though it were covered with glittering, burning spots. She shifted her weight and thought of heading towards the cows and attacking their bull, but decided she did not want to, for her anger was seeping away.

In the stillness of this green paradise the grasses gave off a wonderful fragrance. She was overcome by sweet melancholy. The buffalo mooded. The cows turned at the sound: could it be the forester? No, it was only a buffalo.

She started for the shepherds' camp. She carried her udder gingerly between her hind legs as she headed for her mistress who would milk her. The camp, spread out on the plateau, shimmered and disappeared before her very eyes. She chewed a clump of grass in a small ravine. An uneasy feeling came over her. Why was the herd still grazing? The herd meant ordinary cows. She was a lone buffalo cow.

She stopped outside the tent and summoned her mistress.

"So you're back?" her mistress said. "Why have you come at lunch time? The herd's in the meadow, and here you are. All right, I'll milk you since you've come. But your udder's empty. Why did you come then?"

Her mistress was milking her poorly, yanking at her teats. The buffalo breathed in deeply: it was her smell, and it was her voice, but she wasn't milking properly today. The buffalo did not want to be milked any longer. Far, far away in the low mist there were dark groups of buffaloes, and one of the bulls was calling to her over the forests and meadows.

"Are you shoving me? Are you, Satik? Then who will milk you? Oh, my, you're really fretful. Minas! There's something wrong with the buffalo today."

"Ah! She wants a bull, she does."

"My Satik wants a bull. Hm. July, August, September, October, November, December, January, February, March. . . April, May! You'll have your calf at a good season, when the sun will be warm, and everything will be green. I'll give your calf fresh leaves to nibble."

The buffalo climbed the hill and looked down over God's

green paradise to the distant sun-scorched plains. There, on the plains, groups of buffaloes, glistening with sweat from the heat, swayed in the low mist. One of them, hot-blooded, strong and virile, had thrown back his head and was calling to her. The buffalo sighed and began the climb down to the gorge.

She crossed the blackberry patch, overgrown with nettles, and entered the woods that were illuminated by a soft greenish glow. The crowns of the trees were high, the trunks bare and the ground was barely visible beneath the gnarled roots. The buffalo listened to the calm breathing of the woods. Then the ground became softer, the tangle of knobby roots gave way to a layer of damp, rotting leaves. There was a pungent smell of wild garlic in the air. Finally, a clearing covered by wild strawberry blossoms appeared as a white streak among the trees. The buzzing of bees was as high as the tree-tops. The fragrance of the strawberry blossoms enveloped the buffalo as the tangled underbrush caught at her horns. Soon the clearing was behind her. The stillness in the woods was so complete it was as if she had become deaf.

The rotting leaves gave off an odour of mushrooms. The earth beneath was slimy, and the buffalo went slipping into the ravine. The clay of the ravine clutched at her legs, straining her tendons. She made her way out of the ravine and stopped by the edge of the woods.

About twenty-five days later a hunter named Adam who was a great teller of tall tales saw the trampled clay. He noticed that a log had fallen into the ravine quite recently and stood near the clearing a while but did not venture into it to pick the wild strawberries. Later, standing in the middle of the village street, he boasted, as he tamped the tobacco in his pipe, "I ran into a bear today. At the sound of my voice it tumbled into the ravine, pulling up the young trees and tramping the strawberries, dammit! I was thinking of going in after him, but then remembered the hunting season hasn't yet begun."

The buffalo stood at the edge of the woods near a field of rye, facing the iridescent light of day. The sun above the field was very big, so that each ear of rye had its own share of sun, storing away its grain, with the entire field looking cheerful and proud.

A sweetbriar bush with one white flower, one bud and a dozen green hips, stood expectantly in the middle of the field, breathing in its own fragrance. A small family of fuzzy wild bees was buzzing busily about the bush.

An old pear tree beyond the field wavered in the shimmering heat. There were but a few leaves on the tree which was honey-yellow in hue. For the past seventy years it had moaned softly, trying to heal the terrible wound inflicted upon it by a bolt of lightning. It had spent its entire youth on this, and when the wound had more or less healed, dim-witted Matsak from Karanets had come along, looked up, sniggered and had then hacked away with his axe, as if he were splitting dead wood. He had pulled out the wood for thirty spoons and three ladles from the heart of the trunk. Since such was its fate, the pear tree had now begun to live out its protracted death at the edge of the field of rye.

The swamp that had appeared in spring was now dry and cracking from rage, but it rippled again under the buffalo's weight. A clump of grass had grown up in the midst of clover blossoms and was heady from their fragrance. The young walnut had been shaken hard to make it part with its green nuts that were so good for jam. A snake, drowsy from the sun, was warming itself under the nut tree, letting its drop of poison come to a boil.

Then she climbed the naked hill that was Karanets and which smoked, becoming ever hotter, until it burst into flame from the heat. Waves of hot air rolled over the buffalo, drying her nostrils and eyes. Before beginning the descent, she stopped to catch her breath and looked down. The village that nestled at the foot of the hill was silent: the orchards were still, there was no dust rising from the paths. The red roofs seemed black in the blinding light.

A tiny stream flowed under a fence and into a cabbage patch. The broad-leaved sunflowers were the first to notice the buffalo. The leaves of the poplar were turned up, and this made it look as pale as the cabbages, which were separated from it by an old apple tree and some rows of potatoes, flowering cucumbers and peppers. The poplar stole water from the cabbages, but tried to look as though it were dying of thirst, waiting for the rain that would come down soon. A brown dog was lying under the apple tree. Grandfather Sarkis with his snow-white moustache and beard and his

bald pate gleaming, was pottering about the bee-hives; he heard someone approaching through the even buzzing of the bees and among the sunflowers he saw the scarecrow, dressed in his old jacket and looking at his neighbour's cherry tree.

Grandfather Sarkis's house was by the road. A large yard separated the house from the shed. Grain was drying on mats in the yard. A huge shaggy dog was dozing by the grain, his head resting on its front paws. He was saying: I'm Basar, I'm guarding the wheat; the sparrows are sleeping now. Basar said: someone's coming, and I'd like to know who it is. Basar said: it's a bull. I'd like to know where it's going in this heat. The faint thuds transmitted by the earth stopped. In his sleep Basar felt someone's disquieting presence and someone's heavy gaze on him. The dog raised an eyelid: ah, it was the buffalo! He dashed over to nuzzle her and was out of the gate to greet his mistress. But the road leading to their house was deserted. The dog hesitated for a moment and then ran along the fence. When he reached the last pole he stopped in confusion: the road that led past the neighbours' fences to the naked hill of Karanets was also deserted. Basar was puzzled. He returned to the yard, crestfallen, and lay down between the grain and the buffalo.

Her eyes on the dog, the buffalo sighed deeply and headed towards the shed, butted open the door and entered. The dark shed glittered with cold eyes. There was a moan in the air, something treacherous was hiding in the darkness. Were the rafters moaning? Was it a spider hiding in its web that had frightened buffalo? There was a large lump of rock salt in the crib, exuding murky moisture.

The buffalo backed out, looked around and mooed. There was the cabbage patch, there was the fence, there was Basar and there was the grain. But what did she want? Far, far away, groups of buffaloes were heading towards the warm streams along the sun-scorched plains, and one of the bulls was strong and virile, and hot-blooded. The buffalo dashed out onto the road. Basar followed her. He said: we'll see where the buffalo is going.

Another house stood at the end of the fence. There were rows of beans with crimson blossoms in front of the house and a mean bitch of a dog lying among the beans. If she

didn't bite a passer-by or have a stick thrown at her, or, as a last resort, if she didn't just bark wildly, she would weep from rage. That was why Basar walked around the buffalo, stopped by the beans and bared his teeth, with his tail and his head raised menacingly. However, the bitch did not dart out of the yard, and so Basar, his head and tail still erect, escorted the buffalo past the fences, past the spring, across an abandoned orchard and past an abandoned chapel to the far edge of the village.

Children were splashing in the stream. Nunik and Gayane, being girls, had on their panties, but Ovik, Tigran and Manuk, being boys, were bathing naked. The stream was clear, as were the children's voices, and the great, huge sun warmed one and all.

A lone buffalo cow with a dog trailing behind her were coming down the yellow road. They might well have gone on like that to eternity, living out their uncomplicated lives, to the very end of the days of these children. The buffalo sniffed at the sand and so did the dog. The buffalo crossed the stream, while the dog searched for a narrow place where it could jump over. The buffalo, swaying a bit, climbed a small hillock. The dog found a narrow place, jumped over the stream and raced after the buffalo, that was already starting down the other slope.

Soon the buffalo and the dog reached Cornel Hill. Waves of dry pollen rolled over the hill from the plain below. The buffalo looked back: Basar had sat down and was looking around, to remember the spot, so that later, when he would be asked: "Basar, where did the buffalo go?" he could bring them here. "But I don't know where she went from here." The dog watched the buffalo as far as the bend in the path. It felt sad about parting, and then felt sad because his mistress had not taken her Basar to the mountains for these past three summers. Then Basar jumped to his feet and headed back home. The sparrows would soon awaken and descend upon the wheat, pecking away at it until not a single grain remained.

The buffalo turned along the path leading to a hollow. She might have found a spring there, for she was thirsty, but at that very moment the sour smell of upturned earth assailed her nostrils. There should be fresh slabs of black earth somewheres nearby amidst the sun-scorched infinity

of the plains, and a single pear tree, with some oxen beneath it and two buffalo bulls beside them. One of the bulls raised his head and felt the presence of a cow in his spine, his belly sensing her approaching footsteps. Breathing in the smell that had aroused her, she climbed the hillock. To all sides were the scorched plains. A wave of heat shuddered and dried the sour coolness of the overturned black earth that her nostrils had retained. The buffalo mooed. Her mournful cry fell on the dead silence of the desert that stretched to all sides. Bracing her legs, she wrenched from the earth the long past sounds of the ploughing: the grass roots tearing, the earth being split open as a pair of buffaloes pulled the plough, their front legs straining against the earth.

The buffalo drew in a deep breath and plunged forward, crushing out all sounds and the smell of the withered grasses.

She had been mistaken. The field was somewheres behind. Ahead was the kingdom of stone and rock which would not tremble under her heavy footsteps. The buffalo stopped. The stony ground was unmindful of her weight. The buffalo moved back. The stones did, too. Then they disappeared, swallowed up by the earth. Somewhere among these fields a slight mist rose over fresh ploughland, somewhere at the edge of these fields there was a lone buffalo bull, and his gaze was riveted on her spine. She heard his voice then. She strained her ears, but there was no voice. She continued on her way. The ground broke up into tiny rivulets which carried the current from her pearly hooves to the lone buffalo bull.

The buffalo was again mistaken, for the field ended at the foot of a hill. The slope was becoming ever steeper, and the layer of soil that covered it ever thinner, until it seemed that the wind had blown it completely off the smooth surface of the hill that was now a stone cliff. The blind void of a crevice enticed her. The buffalo mooed, the desert silence trembled and became an echo, and the putrefying stench of a fox splashed out of the crevice. The buffalo snorted, turned away from it and gazed off into the murky distance where God, perhaps, was keeping a bull for her, and, then again, perhaps He wasn't. The last of the topsoil slipped away from under her hooves. The buffalo lost her

footing and became crazed. She raced downwards, crashing through she knew not what, trying to brace herself, leaping, with her blood pounding in her head and her frenzied bellow unheard to her alone. The field was far away. But the buffalo was wrong again. Turning her eyes up to the God of the heavens, she mooed as loudly as she could, and then she mooed again. Her moist call rolled towards the distant fields, dried up in the sun and was mixed with ancient rustlings and anguished expectations.

Here were the violets which had been pollinated in spring by a single drop of moisture and an insect's wing; here were the wild irises which had long since given their sturdy seeds over to the earth for safekeeping; here were the poppies which had absorbed their share of dew and warmth and now, having locked their progeny away in strong pods, had met their death calmly; here among the dry stalks were the crickets who had already brought forth their young and now awaited the coming of evening to begin their chirruping; here the tumbleweed rolled silently in search of something, and there, beyond the field, the buffalo appeared as a black, hulking shape, looking out upon the world.

She continued on in an even, swaying gait across the undulating valley, now descending into a hollow, now climbing a hillock.

The ploughman, dozing in the shade of the pear tree with his cap pulled down over his eyes, heard with half an ear the oxen being taken to the water hole. Now they raised their muzzles from the water, and now they were returning slowly to the field. It was time to harness them up again; at the same time he was dreaming of a naked woman with firm breasts and a hard belly; her hot laughter burned him, as he said to her with a smile, "I can't believe it." The drover bent down to pick up a handful of earth, and the reflection of the one-eyed ox shook its head in the warm, muddy water. The ploughman sensed a new freshness in the air: something was spreading its wings to become the cool of evening. He sensed someone's gaze upon the back of his head as he was saying, "I can't believe it." Then he sat up and looked around dazedly: the same field lay before him, the same sun was shining. He could hear the approaching steps of the oxen. He pulled on his boots, rose, stretched, straightened his spine with a cracking sound and first

yawned and then opened his mouth to curse the drover, though it was not the man's fault that the naked woman had suddenly evaporated.

A buffalo cow was standing beside him.

"Where'd you come from? Didn't we send you to the slaughter-house?"

The buffalo mooed, turned and walked along one of the furrows down the field.

"No," the ploughman said, "you're not one of our buffaloes. You're looking for a bull. Well, you're out of luck. I sent my bull to the slaughter-house."

When the one-eyed buffalo climbed out of the water hole he smelled his kin. At that same moment he heard the mournful call of a buffalo cow. The one-eyed buffalo's team-mate had been sent to the slaughter-house that spring, and now he was paired with an obstreperous ox. He turned his head sharply and saw his kin. A yearning for his tribe rose up in him. He mooed and headed towards the cow. They approached each other and rubbed heads. He realised it was not his lost team-mate; as he rubbed his head against her back he was about to ask God to bring back his lost team-mate, but became confused and forgot what it was he had wanted, because at this very moment something burst into flame and turned to ashes, something familiar, and yet unfamiliar, a strange movement of his male essence. However, this movement was not an expression of desire, but merely a nervous shudder that ran over the surface of the enormous gelding.

With his head still resting on her back he bellowed long and loud. The other oxen sailed by his good eye. They were going back to be harnessed.

The female waited. But the male could only bellow. The female caressed him with her sides, she pressed her neck against him, she walked around him, enveloping his head, his nostrils and his belly with her sweet odour, but the male just stood there in the middle of the furrow like a statue, one-eyed, listless, impassive.

The buffalo cow asked the ploughmen to give her their male for a day and a night, and she would return them a large-headed buffalo calf, but they were leading him by the ear to the yoke and he had lowered his head obediently. The buffalo accompanied the plough to the end of the

field, then turned and, keeping pace with the oxen, went as far as the opposite end. There she went off to a side and beckoned to the ox, but the team turned back again complacently. The buffalo cow butted him lightly. The one-eyed ox rolled his good eye on her from under the yoke. He was pitiful, defenceless, and his neck was wrinkled. The buffalo cow went along with the plough again, but the one-eyed one was an ordinary ox, a beast of burden. She stopped and shifted her weight uncertainly. The plough continued down the field.

She found a path, followed it to the near bushes and looked back. Slowly and methodically the oxen were turning over the lumpy layers of black soil. She crashed through the bushes. Beyond was a slope. For a moment she lost sight of the path that led to a spring. Then she found it again, but it was an old, little trodden path that all but disappeared among the rocks. The slope turned into a cliff, the path slipped into a crevice and flowed down into a gorge. Quite unexpectedly a river took its source here. The river was inhabited by a solitary community of trout. All there was to it were a reed, two clumps of mint, emerald-green sand under the water, two rays of sunshine and four gnats above it, and in the water a mother-fish, a father-fish and a dozen of their children of both sexes.

The buffalo did not find the spring. It was nowhere. She felt its heady aroma and muted whisperings, but still it was nowhere to be seen. She walked back and forth among the smells of the invisible spring, nearly coming upon it, then losing it again. Indeed, the spring was avoiding her nostrils, disappearing into nothing.

First, the earth was moist. Then it became hard. Something clanged under the buffalo's hooves. It was cast iron. The spring flowed beneath it. The buffalo bent her knees to reach the water, but the iron pushed her head away. She rose, walked around it, fell to her knees again, but the iron pushed her muzzle away again. It was invincible and lifeless. She rose and braced her forehead against it, pushing with her horns. It neither pushed back nor gave way. It could have kept on that way for another thousand years. The buffalo licked the smell of water from its edge. She became frantic, for the smell was no more than a smell. She braced her horns against the iron again and moved her

head impatiently, trying to lock horns with it, but the iron was smooth and slippery. She butted it hard, fell to her knees again and, twisting her head around, looked back. No, there was no water, though there was water. The buffalo seemed to be screwing her horns into the iron, but they suddenly slipped, she lost her balance and fell back on the rough concrete.

Then a lone, tired buffalo trudged on beneath the sun, crossing a highway, disappearing in a gorge, and, shortly before sundown, appearing as a dark shape against the jagged line of a hilly plateau. Then breezes flew out from all the bushes, gathering at the ridge, full of the sounds of the past day. But not a single one brought her the call of her bull. It was becoming dark. The plain was enveloped by a sad twilight. The chill reflections of the sun went out like candles on the mountain ridges. The buffalo moored, overcome by a feeling of the unknown, and descended into the darkness of the plain.

The sound of water was hidden in the silence. Descending farther into it, the buffalo felt that the water was probably tepid and not flowing. Soon a horse appeared. It twitched its ears fearfully until it saw that the creature was a buffalo. Then the horse dropped its head and stood there motionlessly, grieving over something in the blackness of the night. There was water nearby that had formed puddles between the rows of a garden, some of which glistened and others did not. Invisible bats swooped over the puddles, filling the air with their oiliness.

The buffalo walked into a wattle fence and scraped her legs against a dry branch.

“Who’s there?”

There was a hole in the fence. The buffalo stuck her head into it and tried to push her way through to the garden. The dried, woven branches cracked and fell.

“I said: who’s there?”

There was a smell of rotting watermelon. Then a shot rang out.

The path suddenly came to life. After two short turns it reached the top of a cliff and then descended to a spring, continuing towards some abandoned sheds and the woods. Was it in the woods or among the ruins of the sheds that an owl cried like a child and laughed like one possessed?

Standing behind the trunk of a beech tree a woman in white peered out, waiting for the buffalo. Somewheres the lost child cried again, and the diaphanous image suddenly dissolved. In its place was the white stump of a dry tree, half-concealed behind the beech. Then the stump became a woman again, and the buffalo, intercepting her glance, came out upon a clearing full of fireflies.

A she-wolf with slack, empty teats beneath her protruding ribs, a long body, a broad chest and a flat, bony skull sprang noiselessly away from the bush, darted into a crevice and flattened herself against the rock. Small tremors caused by someone's footsteps were transmitted by the earth. The steps slowed down, as if in contemplation. Then they stopped. The wolf closed her eyes and held her breath. The steps were cautiously resumed. The buffalo continued on towards the crevice, an ambush. She stopped. The crevice was only a crevice, and the path went over its hump. She walked along the hump. The hump was breathing. She stopped to listen. Yes, the hump was breathing, and the crevice reeked foully of the wolf's smell. The buffalo snorted in disgust. Scattering the gravel and scraping her knees, she climbed the hump and froze. Her gaze slipped over the stone, the wolf, the stone, circled the wolf and came to rest heavily on her skull. The wolf bristled, rose slowly, swayed on her four springy legs and bared her teeth.

The buffalo advanced, ready to gore the wolf. The wolf waited, hoping that the buffalo would hesitate and retreat, but she continued to advance, and the wolf sprang back and waited, her legs spread wide for balance. The buffalo advanced to gore her, and she backed away again. Brushing her muzzle close to the rock, the buffalo breathed in the scent of the wolf. Her hooves drove the gravel into the ground, while the wolf backed away, her tail between her legs, moving beyond the edge of the path. The buffalo's neck was full of meat, her throat was full of meat, her udder was full.... The buffalo threw back her head and told the wolf to back farther away, and the wolf obeyed and took a few more steps back. The buffalo shook her head and snorted, and the sound of it, like a shove, pushed the wolf backwards again. The buffalo became enraged, there was a throbbing in her throat, and the she-wolf chose

to retreat. ... There were four cubs awaiting her in the den, they worried her teats to blood, they had not even let the one their sister had sucked dry off, for as soon as the poor cub had expired, one of her brothers had claimed her share; their father had gone to find them a sheep but had returned badly wounded. He had moped around the den a while and had then gone off to die.

The buffalo was disappearing in the distance. There, between her hind legs was a soft, warm udder.... Just half of it. .. just a small bit. .. just a bite. . . of udder! So soft! As the she-wolf recalled its taste the world seemed to explode.

Who knows how long the earth was dark and still. Then it filled with light and sounds again. There were four hungry cubs in the den. The big-headed one sucked two teats, and the buffalo had kicked her. Life was a sweet but bitter thing. She would have to make milk from her bones and tendons, for there was nothing but bile in her belly. She should have jumped on the buffalo's back, sunk her teeth in the buffalo's neck and eaten her fill. ... Never mind! She would soon have good helpers. As soon as the big-headed one was a year old. . .

"Who's that you've found?" the shepherd called to his dog.

The buffalo had pushed her way through the woods and had come out upon a glade. She mooed with relief. The cows barely raised their heads. They did not care who she was. But the bull behaved differently. He turned quickly to face the buffalo, and his angry eyes seemed ready to kill. She looked over the herd. Wasn't there a single buffalo among so many cows?

"Where'd you come from? Hm? Looking for a bull, aren't you? Well, there aren't any buffaloes here," the shepherd said. "Why, you're Granny Margo's buffalo from Tsmakut! Ai-ai-ai! How'd you ever get here through the forests and over the mountains? You must have had a bad time. ... Ai-ai-ai! So Granny Margo is still alive, is she? But her poor son never did come back from the war. I was supposed to go and tell her he was buried in the Baltic Sea, but I could never make myself bring her such news."

The bull was slowly approaching, trampling ant hills on the way, while she kept searching for a buffalo among the

cows, not realising that the bull was spoiling for a fight. She arched her neck and headed towards the bull, breathing in all the air in the glade and quickening her steps, but the bull had disappeared. The shepherd had chased him back into the herd.

"She's a lady, stupid. And nobody fights a lady," the shepherd said. "As for you, you look like you'd enjoy a fight, even though you are a lady. Ah, you're a pretty one. So sleek and round.... I'd never have thought you liked to fight! I haven't tasted buffalo yoghurt in ten years... Who bit your udder? A dog? Or a wolf? Stand still.... Ah, the devil sank his teeth in deep."

She escaped from the shepherd and headed towards the herd, for there had to be a buffalo bull there. She weaved in and out of the herd, stopping to sniff each cow, but all of them were cows, munching grass and turning it into milk. The shepherd, too, smelled of milk. The cows were all contented: the grass was delicious, there was fresh water nearby, the glade was vast and there, beside them, grazing peacefully, was their sleek bull.

She gazed off into the distance across their flat backs that had melted into a single back, and she mooed plaintively. This was not envy for the tranquil happiness of others, but her urgent desire to be elsewhere, to vanish.

Once herds of water buffaloes had wandered across the sunlit plains to the warm, distant backwaters. Large-headed buffalo calves with little bumps where their horns would one day be wobbled along; young heifers yearned for motherhood; the bulls would stop every so often and look back anxiously, making sure that none of their tribe had failed behind. The herds had wandered on and on across the sunlit plains. Where had they gone to?

"Which way should I head you, so's you'll be happy?" the shepherd said and smacked his staff against her shank.

She wanted to go to Kechut, but Kechut was now a workers' settlement where wood was steamed and shaped into chairs that were sent to Iran.

The buffalo looked back. The shepherd was waving his arms at her, as if to say: "Go on! Go on, now!" He bent down, as if to pick up a stone, and she lumbered off.

The dark door of a dank, mildewed chapel appeared at the edge of the woods, hidden among the branches of the

hornbeams. A fragment of a stone slab near the chapel moved, froze, then moved again. It was an old woman's back. She was praying, her hands cupped over a lighted candle. The old woman turned and crossed herself and only when she had said the prayer to the end did she concede that she was not staring at death, but at a buffalo. Thank goodness this was not a dream. The old woman sighed with relief. If you dreamt of a buffalo it meant dire illness or even death. Her eyes never leaving the buffalo, she felt around for her walking stick, leaning on it and, God be merciful, stepped onto the road.

They stared at each other. Then the buffalo set off, too, and the old woman's heart skipped a beat. It was her sister Margo's buffalo. For many years now the old woman had been asking her son Stepan to take her over to see her sister Margo. She would have visited there for a while and then would have gone on to Echmiadzin with Margo's grandson. There they would kiss the patriarch's hand and say, "We are content with your gift of life, Lord."

"Where are you going? Did Margo sell you to someone? Or are you lost? When I was a girl it took me three days and three nights to cross the mountains from our village to here. The lute played all the way, for I had been given in marriage. My sister wept, for she was sorry to lose me, my brother frowned and whipped his horse. My good brother, my dearest thirteen-year old sister, my kind father..."

But the buffalo was now far away. "Hey! Hey, there!" the old woman cried, in the hope that someone would answer her call and stop the buffalo. But the pale, reaped fields that were spotted with the bleak colours of faded flowers were deserted. The old woman's eyes became strained from peering down the road until the buffalo had disappeared, had dissolved in the sunshine. The old woman hurried back to the village to find someone who knew how to work a telephone. He would telephone to Kechut, to Yerevan, to Gugark and from there to Tsmakut and get her sister Margarita on the line. He would say, "Hello, your buffalo Satik was near Choragiukh, and goodness knows where she was heading, and your sister saw her, but couldn't stop her. Have you sold Satik, or where in the world was she going?"

Suddenly the air slipped away from under the buffalo's nostrils and down the mountain slope. She stopped. The

flowers, bees, leaves and stalks were making some kind of new air. She continued on her way.

Something she could not fathom blocked her way, first as a monotonous, peaceful noise, then as hammering, clanging, heat, steam and the choking smell of carbide. It had drained all the smells and breezes from the treeless, dead mountains to the tree-covered blue mountains, from all the spaces between the leaves, from the tree hollows and flower blossoms; extracting them, making them white-hot, and, finally, breathing them on the buffalo as a scorching flame of carbide. It soldered iron to iron, covered the asphalt with asphalt, turned clay into cast iron and once again drained all the smells and breezes from the treeless, dead mountains to the tree-covered blue mountains.

Everything here was buried beneath concrete: the ancient green valley, the lone oak tree, the reeds, the four poppies, the sweetbriar bush, the fuzzy family of wild bees, the white field of rye, the buffalo bull, the shepherd's brown dog and the buffalo calf, all were under the ground. Perhaps the calamity had occurred because the buffalo bull was locked under the ground? In olden times people would say: if the red cow moos under the ground, there's going to be an earthquake.

The buffalo stood on a huge slab of rock, beset by doubts, waiting...

Grandfather Tigran, who in his youth had tended buffaloes, sat on his sixth-storey balcony, his head drooping, clicking the beads of his rosary when he remembered them and gave himself up to the sweet call of death, which alone would release him from the stultifying air of the city. "What's that? . . . A buffalo? Or not? . . . Then Levon came galloping up on his horse, and that took care of that.... Is it a buffalo? Or not? . . . Let me see. . . ." he mumbled.

The buffalo left the path and headed towards the city. The sun was going down, sinking beyond the horizon, but the city stretched on and on beside the plateau. It seemed there was no end to it. The buffalo moosed plaintively, raising reproachful eyes to the orange sun, as if to ask it to whom it was abandoning its child in this alien world. Night was advancing far below in the hollow. The wall of confused noises was dissolving and falling away. A myriad lights went on in the hollow, and the city seemed covered

with a brilliant, glittering roof. It seemed that one could cross this roof to the mountains looming in the distance.

The buffalo approached the cliff and backed away. She trudged along the edge of the hollow, trying to find the end of the city, coming up close to the slope and then shying away again. Suddenly something familiar touched her, caressing and warming her. Perhaps it was her desire to be relieved of the milk that had accumulated in her udder; perhaps the dog Basar had run out to meet her, or the bull she was seeking had bellowed in the drifting mist. She was not sure. The road home had become confused in her memory, so that her mistress's kerchief reeked of carbide, the bull was not a real bull, even though he had bellowed.... The buffalo wept a bit.

The city was sleeping. It became chilly towards dawn. She had reached the outskirts. A dog, unseen, was barking. A rooster crowed hurriedly, as if he were late. She was drowsy and imagined the sound of her steps was coming from afar. The air smelled of damp fleece, but this could not be so, for the mountains were somewheres far behind. She heard a sheep bleating. Then her mistress said, "Good for you! You've a lot of milk today." The buffalo stumbled and came to with a start. The earth was trembling from the rapid, mincing steps of sheep. She heard a drover whistle. No, she was not deceived. Then the same sheep bleated hoarsely three times in a row. The smell of the flock curled over the incline, lingered and then rushed down towards the city.

"Look at that!" the drovers said. "The city's got itself a buffalo."

Both the sheep and the dog running beside them were kin to the buffalo. With them here she was no longer afraid of the city.

The street lights paled. The street, squeezed between the rows of houses, was alive with the movement of the tired stream of sheep. The same sheep bleated hoarsely, and its bleating echoed in the void as in a cave. It would have been strange, indeed, if, in this void, there were sheepfolds, shepherds' fires and dogs, alert in their sleep. Surely this street could not lead to a pasture. The buffalo caught the salty smell of blood. Every nerve in her body, section by section, became paralysed, and she went limp, as if she were being sucked

into a warm slough and might die, but could not resist. Perhaps it was imagined, perhaps it was real: something flapped its wings loudly over the flock which was now at a standstill. The buffalo did not know whether this was a bird or death itself, for she was too stunned to understand.

The sheep pressed against the iron gates, jostling each other and shivering. The sheepdog shuddered and backed away. Then it pressed against the buffalo's legs and forced down the howl that was rising in its throat. The sheep seemed to be in a stupor, their fears abated, a drowsiness came over them. Then the gates were unlocked, they were jerked back and the sides were pulled far apart. The buffalo saw two unblinking eyes disappearing in the far end of the enclosure. They went out for a moment and then were riveted to the sheep again, so green and piercing. The block flowed silently into the enclosure. An unseen force was insistently shoving the buffalo towards the gates.

Then someone shouted at her. It was one of the drovers. He got the end of his staff behind her ear, pressed hard and forced her to turn her head backwards. Then he smacked her on the side and said, "Go on! Your time will come. Go and find your home."

"Go on!" the drover said and whacked her across the back.

However, the unknown force was still pulling the buffalo towards the gates, turning her hind legs to jelly. She stumbled, but the drover had hit her twice, and each time with force, so that pain wracked her sides. She tried to throw it off her back, but it would not let up, it kept chasing her away from the gates.

A mangy mongrel followed her for a while, trying to recall whether they were kin or not. He stopped, pondered over this, but his feeble memory could not conjure up anything of value, so he let this tangled mess be and ran off to the slaughter-house.

At about this time Yervand Khachaturian was washing at the camping grounds. As he splashed cold water on his body he said to himself that he was a he-man, as hot-blooded as an Armenian and as reserved as an Englishman. He said that Russian, as English, was an international language, and that all of the forty young Polish girls in his group were madly in love with him and jealous of each other, because he was olive-skinned, hairy and reserved.

"You have fifteen minutes for breakfast," Yervand Khachaturian said, looking at none of the forty girls he was speaking to. "Varpet, I think the bus will be ready for us in fifteen minutes," Yervand Khachaturian said without looking at the bus driver.

Armenia is a land of modern city planning, ancient monuments and good roads. The Armenian people are hardworking and hospitable. If half of the Armenia nation had not been slaughtered during the First World War, this people could now have invited the entire world to dine at its table. Our mountains are harsh and primeval. But our people are cordial and friendly. That is why this small land, Armenia, is called a land of contrasts. On the one hand, there are the harsh mountains; on the other, there are the friendly people.

The bus blew its horn once, twice, and came to a stop. Ah! A strange creature was ambling down the road. It didn't look as if it intended to let the bus pass. The driver got out and chased it off the road. Then he climbed back into his seat, but by then the buffalo was walking in the middle of the highway again. Yervand Khachaturian stuck his head out of the window to shout at the shepherd, but there was no herd in sight. The buffalo was a lone creature. The bus driver honked again, then stepped on the gas, with his hand on the horn, but the buffalo did not even quicken its step. The bus nearly ran into it. "These Armenians are so excitable!" the girls exclaimed.

Yervand got out and chased the buffalo off the road again. He could see the rip on her udder. He waited for the bus to come abreast of him, and all the while he had a grip on the buffalo's ear. When he re-entered the bus it was with the air of a real toreador. There, among the bare knees, the firm, bouncing breasts and the rules of diplomatic etiquette, he lowered his firm buttocks onto the soft seat and began to speak.

"I believe this creature is called a water buffalo. There are still several cattle-breeding peoples in the Caucasus. The first colonies of Polish Armenians were settled at the dawn of the Middle Ages. Our ancestors are indebted to the Poles for everything, including the self-government of the early settlements. It is a known fact that an entire Armenian battalion took part in the Battle of Grunwald. Jerzy Kawalerowicz, the famous Polish film producer, is an Armenian.

Every Polish Armenian can become another Jerzy Kawalero-wicz, for every Polish woman is a born and talented actress. . . . Attention everyone! We are starting the climb to Agavnavank. The monastery was founded in 825. We do not know the name of the architect, but we shall call him Trdat. . . ." And thus, with his head bowed, in his green sun-glasses and his tie that was loosened at the collar, he was imprinted in the girls' hearts and on their film as well.

Then, at the sound of mooing, their faces, each adorned by a pair of sun-glasses, turned back, unmindful of his hand which pointed towards the monastery cupola. The buffalo was in no way connected with the architecture of Agavnavank, and the girls smiled. Yervand Khachaturian would not for a moment let his listeners forget his existence.

"A small aside," he announced, and it just so happened that now both he and the buffalo had their attention. He went up to the buffalo, shut his eyes tight, grabbed it by the horn and only then did he turn to face their cameras: "This shot will be a remembrance of Africa."

There was a huge welt on the buffalo's back, her udder had been bitten by a dog or a wolf and must have pained her, since her teats were taut. She was in need of sympathy and Yervand Khachaturian, his lips turned up in a crooked, foolish smile, sniffed and, with his eyes still shut, either patted or slapped her and whispered, more to himself than out loud, "Where are you going? How are you, Satik, old girl? And how's your mistress? And what am I to do now?"

The driver was blowing his horn. Yervand Khachaturian compressed his lips, stuck his fists into his pockets and headed towards the bus. . . . One takes a lot from life, and one must give a lot as well. . . .

The buffalo cow had suffered greatly the last time in order to conceive, for she had only met her bull on the way back. She had spent a short time with him, but had not conceived. Two months later she had become restless again, and had set out, following her old trail to a small glen by a lonely oak. She had spent two days there. Her calf was born late in August of that year. When he was two weeks old he had caught cold, for it was a cold autumn. He became feverish, moaned and whimpered, and died.

The buffalo moved off when two goats bleated in the heat-drenched thicket, and a snake slithered by her feet with a

hissing sound. A cow, hobbled like a horse, mooed at the edge of the meadow. Why would anyone hobble a cow? The ears of wheat were moving in two places where lambs must have wandered into the field. The watchman was out of sight. Far away, on the slope of a mountain, the white tents of a shepherds' camp could be seen. The buffalo trudged along the edge of the field. Then, to the surprise of the watchman who might have had an eye on her from some vantage point, she took off at a gallop across the field in response to a familiar voice. The ears of wheat whipped at her udder. She sensed the nearness of a bull. Happiness was so close when, suddenly, an asphalt road cut across the field. There was a shiny automobile parked at the side of the road. Edward Airape-tian, balding, fat and good-natured, was lying on the grass beside the car, saying pleasant things to the two women who were sitting next to him. But his words were as dust, for they were only words. He wiped his bald pate with his handkerchief and, spying the buffalo, exclaimed, "Toro! Ah, what a fine fellow you are!"

But he had not spoken the truth: the buffalo was ungainly. Then he went on to describe a Spanish bullfight to the women, who were listening to him intently. His description was beautiful, but he lied, for the creature that was crossing the field was not a bull, but a buffalo cow. He then went on to praise the satiny smoothness of the women's round knees, but he was indifferent to these knees, otherwise he would not have praised all four of them, and shamelessly at that. Then, in an off-handed way, he told the women that nature worship was not encouraged in their country, but that he himself was a fervent worshipper of nature and saw in this worship the only way out of the tragedy into which our planet had been plunged; and yet, these were but hollow words, as the extent of his love for the buffalo cow, lightning, mowing and harvesting depended upon the quality of the *khashil* he had eaten that day. He told them that the bull's horns itched and it was on its way to fight another bull, whose horns also itched, and all for the sake of improving the species.

The day ended at a steep rise. The buffalo took the tents that came into view higher up on the mountain for a shepherds' camp, but these were the tents of a geological team. The geologists were drilling for ore.

They turned off their drill and shouted, "Welcome!"

She continued on past them, but then recalled that she was tired, that her legs were about to give out, and that she really had no place to go. She turned her head, mooded, nibbled some grass and decided to remain, for there was no wind within the circle of tents. She turned round several times, picking out a spot, and finally lay down. A few moments later she pulled her legs out from under her heavy body, lay her head on the ground and dozed off. Flower blossoms jostled each other beside her. She felt she was floating on air and then fell into a deep sleep.

In her dream she was licking her poor calf's forehead. The calf moaned weakly. The shepherd Minas and her mistress had fooled her: they had thrown her calf's woolly skin over a cow's calf and had poured salt water over it. In her dream she was licking her sick calf's large head and sobbing, and this quiet grief was as wholesome as sleep. Then her calf's woolly skin slipped off to the ground and the other calf, the one that smelled of a cow, began to shiver under her belly. She butted it away and bellowed.

The buffalo awoke and looked around with unseeing eyes. The flowers were still jostling each other. She decided to get up, but was too tired, and so tucked her legs under her and rested her head on her shoulder. Her udder was contracting slightly, her mistress would begin milking her at any moment, but the milk would not come. She relaxed her teats. The milkmaid was pulling at them gently yet firmly, but they still contracted and ached.

It was past midnight when she awoke. She recalled where it was she had stopped to spend the night and listened attentively. The people in the tents were asleep. At the very edge of the earth a dog was howling without a stop. A shepherd's campfire glowed, and the stars gave off a cold, invigorating light. She rose, stretched, straightened her back and went off to graze in the fresh chill of the night. When two of the geologists went out to urinate at dawn they saw her. She raised her head and mooded, as if to proclaim the state of peaceful coexistence in which they lived. They laughed and said good-naturedly, "Drop dead, you scarecrow!"

"Who's there?" came a hoarse voice from one of the tents. "It's nothing," one of the two replied, "just yesterday's buffalo saying good morning."

"She's probably lost."

Then, in the ensuing stillness, one of the men got angry while the others burst out laughing.

Later, when they were all up, one of them said to her, "Have you decided to treat us to some yoghurt? That's a grand idea."

She had nowhere to go. The world, of course, was huge, and kept on expanding, but it was losing its charm, for the sadness was vanishing, disappearing from the face of the earth. She realised that there was a herd nearby, but her restlessness had subsided. The path smelled of felt tents, dogs, cheese, yoghurt and rubber boots. However, she could not see the shepherds' camp and the buffalo herd on the opposite side of the mountain, for they were hidden from view. What she did discover was the fresh smell of the herd that hung on the spring water. Because the water was so tasty, she drank her fill and groaned with pleasure. She did not move off the path when she saw a small girl carrying two pails coming for water, and was not frightened by the dogs' barking. She stood there, big and black and strong, in the midst of the barking dogs, and her heavy gaze bore into the ground. A man appeared. He shouted at the dogs, tossed his stick at them and went up to her. He scratched her ear. The main's mother came over next. She took the buffalo in from all angles, her crossed arms supporting her slack breasts, then sat down on her haunches, felt her udder and counted the teats, all of which were in order. "One, two, three, four," the woman counted. She then rose and fairly beamed.

"Shko," she said to her son as she admired the buffalo's muzzle, "your mother writhed in pain to bring you into this world. Why won't you buy your mother at least one buffalo cow, Shko?"

The man took hold of the buffalo's ear and headed her towards the tent. "Get some salt," he said to his mother. "No, not that, the good salt. And bring me a rope."

"Buy your mother at least one buffalo cow, Shko, and your mother will live to be a hundred. She'll raise your children, milk your sheep, and have buffalo yoghurt for you, Shko."

The man patted the buffalo's side, then walked away and potted near the tent. Then he came back and patted her rump and back, then scratched her ear and, in the next instant, nicked the tip of her ear and rubbed ashes into the small wound. Now he had fifty sheep, one buffalo cow, four

cows, three goats, one mare and colt and two dogs, all marked with the same nick on their left ear. He would call the buffalo Nardoz. And who said he had stolen the mare? Here were her registration papers. He'd show them to anyone.

"Milk her," he said to his mother. "Her undder's full. Here's the salt for you," he said to the buffalo. "Go on, eat it. Your ear doesn't hurt any more."

The old woman stood there, her arms crossed on her chest, and wept. Then she said, smiling through her tears, "If you let her go a wolf might kill her, won't it, Shko? That would be too bad, wouldn't it, Shko?"

The man was scratching the buffalo's ear. "Certainly," he said, "a wolf's a stupid beast. It'll kill a buffalo for sure. She's eleven years old."

His daughter returned with two full pails of water. Her silver bangles jingled when she clapped her hands in joy. Then she stopped, her fingers interlaced, and said, "What a fine buffalo I have! But where's her calf?"

Shko's mother rinsed a copper milk pail, wept silently again and, leaning under the buffalo's belly, weeping and humming a tune at the same time, began milking her ever so gently: whoosh-whoosh-whoosh.

The buffalo drew in a breath: the woman smelled of sheep. Then she moved her hind leg aside and reluctantly relaxed her teats. The cool breeze was flitting off, sliding down the mountain slope, but the smell of sheep and of a shepherd's camp remained. It was sunny, but it was not hot. High in the sky overhead a small white cloud was silently kicking off its swaddling clothes. Under the cloud, swaying in the clear trills of its song, a skylark rejoiced: the sun was shining, it was cool, here was a cloud and me, and an old woman milking a buffalo. How wonderful life was!

Suddenly the buffalo's teats tensed.

"What's the matter?" the old woman said anxiously. Through sleep-bleary eyes the buffalo saw the valley below slowly awakening and coming to life. Everything around was becoming darker, but the valley at the foot of the mountain became covered with hot splashes of light. Suddenly, in the hot valley, her bull became separated from a group of buffaloes that seemed to have materialised from thin air, which made him still blacker and bigger. He bellowed long and hoarsely, straining his spine and belly more than his lungs.

The buffalo cow stood there and was a long time replying to his call. She was blinded and deafened. With her head thrown back, her hooves lifted off the ground. Something nearly cracked her neck, making it arch sharply. It was the rope that was tied to a stake. The buffalo did not move, waiting for the man to loosen the rope. Instead, he began shortening it, winding it round the stake. The buffalo yanked it one way, then another. The knot was tight, the rope was hurting the roots of her horns. Then, both the stake and the man were being dragged along the ground. She was escaping in great leaps. The dog was yapping furiously now in front of her muzzle, now at her tail. The rope got into the cleft of her hoof and slipped out again. The stake hit her in the belly, the dog squealed somewhere far away, then the rope got into the cleft of her hoof again and she stumbled and fell crashing to her knees, and got up again, dazed by her own rage. She stopped, raised her unseeing eyes and moored.

The bull was motionless, rolling around the bellow that wanted out.

Then slowly, stopping at each step, she descended to the valley and, just as slowly, approached him. They looked at each other. They did nothing themselves after that. Everything else was done by the god of the shepherds and buffaloes. He removed the space that separated them. He placed her neck under the bull's throat, he mixed their amber currents, enveloped them in an unpenetrable blanket of sighs, languor, deafness, blindness and shamelessness. And when they were one, there was no more buffalo cow, for she was no longer a cow, but a red-hot womb. And when her blood had cooled and calmed down, she moved away from the bull and became enveloped in herself, a separate, black buffalo cow that had conceived. The voices of the mountains filled her ears, the darkness had vanished, the brightness of day had returned. The shapes of the mountains and the buffaloes shuddered and became solid again. The world was resurrected.

The buffalo drank her fill of water, raised her head and, through the haze of the past days, saw her mistress. She was about to start on her way back, but the rope slipped into the cleft of her hoof again. Out of the corner of her eye she looked at the bull who now seemed to be a strange, ridicu-

lous creature. The rope bit into her again. She heard steps behind her. It was the bull. It was stupid of him to follow her, because he did not live in her mountains. The rope annoyed her. She stopped, despairing of ever being rid of it, and at that very moment she felt something heavy on her back. She spun round and butted the strange bull, who also happened to be a stupid animal. He stood there in the middle of the path and kept looking back in dumb confusion. Her hoof hurt so much the pain was as fire in her eye. She stopped again to listen to all her pains and aches: in her womb, that was slowly creating a living being, in her eye, in the cleft of her hoof, in her rib, in her side, in the tip of her ear. She heard the bull's steps over all these aches and pains. She turned threateningly and arched her neck. The bull stopped in confusion, looked about and then, like the fool he was, began to graze.

The geologists blocked her way. They laughed, waved their axes and arms, and one of them seemed very angry and made her kneel. When she was completely defeated and had admitted her defeat they let her go.

She started out, stepping gingerly, tensely. She tripped and stopped. But the rope was not biting into her hoof any more. She waited another moment, shook her head, freeing her horns from the memory of the rope and set out with long, confident steps.

As twilight was falling on the fifth day, when the cows, heavy with milk, were seeking out their yards, she entered the shepherds' camp. She entered the camp as an ox returning from ploughing, as a reaper returning from the fields, as a traveller who has reached home at midnight, as a summer evening in the country.

She lumbered past the neighbours' cows, stopped outside a felt tent and moored.

"Satik!" her mistress called. "Are you back, my dear?"

A big Avakian

THE LAST LINE

Gegam-airik¹ stuck his spade into the ground and looked about. A fog had obscured the world. He sank down on a damp clump of earth by the vegetable bed and rubbed his eyes to dispel it. Suddenly the Angel of Death appeared to him. The apparition stood by the open garden gate. It had a green willow branch in one hand and a scythe in the other, while a fog curled up around its feet.

“Come, Gegam...”

The voice seemed to be coming from the bottom of a well.

Gegam felt that he had seen the angel before. But where? As a Bible illustration? Or perhaps in a dream? He could not recall. He broke out in a cold sweat, then turned around and called, “Satenik! Varsenik! Sirun!”

And while his daughters-in-law were running down the steps he managed to ask, “Couldn’t you have come a bit later?”

“No,” came the answer. “Tuti is waiting for you there.”

The women’s steps seemed to frighten off the apparition. It disappeared, though the fog that enveloped the trees and all else remained.

“Ask someone to come and help you take me upstairs. My hour has struck. I’m leaving this world.”

The women were alarmed. Sirun began to wail. Satenik, the eldest daughter-in-law, shouted at her, “I’ll tear your tongue out, you crow!”

They went for the neighbours and carried Gegam-airik upstairs. This man who had crossed so many countries in his lifetime now lay helplessly on his back. His eyes were closed.

There is a certain line which a person reaches, and when

I

Airik (Armenian)—a respectful term of address.

he does he stops to look back. What does he see? What has he left behind?

How imperfect the world is! Just when you finally decide to enjoy your leisure, having shaken the dust of distant roads from your feet, to rest in the shade of a tree, the garden gate creaks open and a voice says, "Come, Gegam."

"Satenik! Varsenik! Sirun!"

Sirun, the youngest daughter-in-law, sat at his bedside, swallowing her tears, thinking, "I'll jump off the cliff. I don't wish to live in this horried world without Gegam-airik."

Then, to calm her fears, her mind dwelled on various thoughts: "Smbat should be home soon. . . . My husband Smbat will appear, clothed in sunshine, sweaty and covered with the dust that rolls after the returning wagons. He stands behind me as Mount Ara... . Gegam-airik said, 'I'm leaving this world.' But which one of us will remain in this world forever?... There has always been love, and there have always been people. I love Smbat with one kind of love and Gegam-airik with another. Oh, how sorry we'll be to bury the old man. He should be raised to the clouds instead and be placed on a rug-covered couch there."

"No!" she cried aloud in her grief. "He won't leave us!"

Satenik, the eldest daughter-in-law, entered the room carrying a pitcher. She was about to say, as before, "I'll tear your tongue out, you crow!" when the middle daughter-in-law, Varsenik, entered.

They sat side by side, gazing at the man whose life was ebbing.

His sons Khachatur, Sargis and Smbat nearly tore the gate off its hinges in their haste. At the sound of their steps Gegam-airik opened his eyes and said, "Send someone for the children."

Their neighbour Garsevan went for the children. Soon Gegam-airik's grandchildren entered, their fingers and faces stained with ink. They crowded round their grandfather. He gazed at them for a long moment, as one does a last time. Then he said to their parents, "I don't want you going after any doctors! If you do, I'll never die happy."

There were sighs and moans coming from the garden, where the old neighbour women who had sensed the coming of death had gathered.

"Get those old hags out of the garden! I don't want any weeping around here!" Gegam-airik said.

Everyone tumbled out of the room. Gegam-airik heard the gate bang shut, followed by the soft steps of his family, his worldly riches, his universe, as they ascended, trying not to make the stairs creak.

"Satenik! Varsenik! Sirun! Pull the curtains, the light hurts my eyes. And leave me now. I want to sleep. I'll call you when I want you."

Ah, but Gegam-airik did not want to sleep. He crossed his arms on his chest and closed his eyes. He had reached the line at which one stops to look back. There are people who, sensing their own approaching death, experience a need to open their hearts and speak out, to confess their sins, to say a last word to those remaining on this earth. Gegam-airik's only desire was to look back and see once again the many roads he had traversed. He was unlike those old men who sit around telling their beads all day, their minds in the past, recalling a massacre or some other terrible injustice. Gegam-airik was also from the Van region, he had also seen the massacre, he had been orphaned and brought up in miserable orphanages. However, being far from his native land, he had always worked hard, and this work had left him no time to tell his beads and complain. He had traversed this vast, yet small world from one end to the other and had borne his grief in silence everywhere he went. It was a grief so shattering that if he were able to cast it into Lake Van the waters would begin to churn, they would rise up out of their banks.

There were many men from the Van region here in Megri: Gukas, Mesrop and Shmavon, and all of them seemed to feel it their duty, whether appropriate or not, to impress their audience by saying, "I was born right in Van Region!" Instead of taking up a pick or a spade they told their beads, sitting in the sun in winter, leaning their backs against a cool wall in summer, their minds forever on the past.

To Gegam-airik's mind his father, Khachatur-airik, was a true man of Van. He had grabbed an axe and rushed at the marauding Turks who were armed with rifles and daggers. He had cracked the skulls of three of them and was about to attack the fourth under the old nut tree when a bullet hit him. Then the Turks rushed into the house. Then. . . .

Then they came upon Khachatur-airik's daughters Almast and Firiuz, whom their father had hidden in the great clay jars in the yard. They pulled the girls out by their hair and dragged them into the cellar. Gegam, who had been hiding behind a pile of dry leaves, had witnessed it all. The world turned black, then red before his eyes. He recalled all that followed in a haze. He had dashed over to the nut tree, grabbed his father's axe and killed first one and then the other Turk on the cellar steps. Then, as today's mist, a heavy blanket of fog covered all else.

"How did I ever survive?" he wondered aloud.

Though his eyes were closed, he sensed that his daughters-in-law were looking in on him.

Then the long roads began. Gegam, son of Khachatur, the miller from Zarants near Lake Van, set out for Echmiadzin, and from there to Europe, and from Europe to America. He was a rag-picker's helper, a newspaper boy, a street cleaner. How many sleepless nights had he spent, hungry and cold, under bridges and on park benches? Nothing could compare with the beauty of his native Van: neither sky, water, earth, trees, moon nor stars. All were worse. All seemed created by people, not nature. Having met nothing but misfortune in America, he set out on his journeys again. If someone were to ask him, "Where are you going, Gegam?" he would probably have replied, "It makes no difference, for I can't go back to Van."

Thus did he finally reach Persia.

The city of Kazvin appeared in his mind's eye, as clear as made of crystal. He heard the rustling poplars, the bubbling stream rushing down the mountain-side, the monotonous chirping of crickets in the moonlight, the flour-covered mill and ... Tuti, the Gypsy girl who entered the emptiness of his life like a frightened gazelle one rainy night in spring and became the mother of his three fine sons, Khachatur, Sargis and Smbat.

A happy smile brightened Gegam's face at the untold beauty of his recollections. In the thirty years that had elapsed since then Tuti had never once appeared to him as clearly as now.

His memory brought back another bit of the past. He recalled the day he had drawn six hundred tumans, his entire savings, from the pouch in his belt and had handed them

to the owner of the decrepit mill, saying, "You can go now."

The miller, whose name was Rasul, sat down on the bank of the stream, for he could not and did not want to leave his mill and his world.

Then Gegam, now the owner of his world, walked over to him and asked, "Where will you go now, my brother Rasul?" Rasul was silent. He was probably thinking, "It makes no difference, for I can't stay on at the mill."

Gegam-airik opened his eyes and saw nothing: neither the ceiling, the windows, the curtains, nor the people standing silently outside his door. Suddenly he shouted, "Where can I go, my brother Rasul, if I can't go back to Van?"

Tire women rushed into the room. Sirun, who could not cope with her emotions, bit her fingers to keep from crying. Sargis stood in the doorway, blocking his wife Varsenik's way, and Khachatur....

"Take it away," Gegam said to Satenik, his eldest daughter-in-law, who had brought him some pomegranate juice. She tossed the pitcher over the balcony railing and exclaimed, "You think I'm worse than anyone else here!" "Satenik!" her husband Khachatur admonished.

She was about to place her fists on her hips and say to him, "I'm the eldest one in this house after Gegam-airik!" but just then Khachatur, his eyes burning with rage, said, "I'll tear your tongue out!"

Varsenik helped Sirun downstairs. Satenik followed them. The three women sat down by the well. The oppressing dampness that came from its depths and the damp silence which rose from the water seemed to draw them closer together. Each of them had her own life, but they were three sisters-in-law and no power in the world could drive a wedge between them. Their husbands also sat side by side, smoking silently. The sky was high and blue, with their neighbour Garsevan's pigeons circling overhead. How were the passers-by whose shadows flitted across the garden fence to know that a man was dying in this house?

Tuti had come to him, her eyes pleading insistently.

It was the look of a lost fawn. They met as would two exhausted natives of Van, who stop in silence to face each other and whose silence tears asunder all the noise and commotion of this world.

It was a rainy night in spring. Someone knocked at the mill door. Who could it be?

"Who's there?" Gegam shouted. "If you've come with ill will, go away! If not, I'll open up."

There was no answer, yet the knocking continued. In fact someone was banging so hard you'd think he would break the door. Gegam grabbed his axe from the rack on the wall and threw open the door. No, it was not a ghost. Standing there, dripping wet, was a Gypsy girl with green eyes, a green spot between her brows and wearing a green dress. She ran in, pressing one hand to her heart and pointing into the night with the other. There were Turks in blue pantaloons on the opposite bank. One of them shouted, "Hey, miller! Chase the girl out before we wreck your place!" Gegam wanted to shout back, "Just you try! I know you dogs! I'm from Van. I saw you wreck our home, shoot Kha-chatur-airik and drag my sisters into the cellar!"

But could he say all that?

Swinging his axe instead, he shouted, "Just you try to wreck my house! I'll make such a mess of you your ancestors will turn in their graves!"

The men on the far bank held a whispered conference and then one of them shouted, "We'll remember that, miller!" The Gypsy with the frightened green eyes, the green spot between her brows and the green dress pressed against the wall. Gegam had a closer look at her, as if he couldn't quite believe his eyes. Then he bolted the door, nodded towards his felt cloak thrown over a rock and said, "Sit down, girl. Don't be afraid. No one will hurt you. Where are you from?" The girl shook her head and touched her lips.

"She can't talk from fright," he thought.

Meanwhile, the millstones ground on monotonously, the rain rustled in the willows, and it seemed that dawn would never break. The girl fell asleep where she sat. Gegam picked her up, stretched her out on the couch and wanted to pull off her wet dress, but was too shy to. Instead, he covered her with his warm felt cloak.

Gegam-airik could not recall meeting the district chairman the day before, nor what they had spoken of. He could not recall who it was who had said, just this morning, "When will you drop by to see the orchards, Gegam?"

But Gegam recalled, as one recalls every strand of a

cobweb, that rainy night in spring and every last bit of dust in his mill.

The spring dawn finally broke. The clouds seemed to have wrung every drop of water from themselves during the night and now disappeared. Gegam walked about the yard. He looked at the drooping willow which shivered like the rain-drenched girl, then at the murky water and at his world which had cost him six hundred tumans, and he thought of Van.

"Khachatur-airik," Gegam said aloud, "You should have kept a good rifle in your shed, not an axe and wine!"

A Gypsy woman was walking along the river bank. "Good morning, brother miller," she said, approaching Gegam. "I thank you a thousand times for having saved my daughter from those beasts."

"Is she your daughter then?"

"Yes, my only one."

"She can't talk from fright."

The woman smiled sadly. "She can't talk, because she's deaf and dumb."

"Oh. And doesn't she have a father?"

"He left for the South and never returned."

Gegam pondered over this. Then he asked, "Why have you come here?"

"I've come for my daughter. We're breaking camp and leaving for the South."

"What for?"

"To work. It's time to harvest the opium, and there's nothing more for us Gypsies to do here."

"What's your daughter's name?"

"Tuti."¹

Just then the mill door creaked open. Tuti emerged, saw her mother and backed up against the wall. One hand pressed against her heart, the other waved frantically, saying, "No! No!"

Her mother spoke to her, but Tuti began waving her hands again.

"She doesn't want to go with you," Gegam said.

"I can see that. But what'll I do? A dog's life awaits her. If those beasts set eyes on her it'll be her end."

¹ *Tuti*, from "tuta", a mulberry.

"I won't let them take her. I'll crack their skulls!" Gegam said angrily. "Let her stay on here. She can look after the house. Who knows, she might meet a shepherd or someone else who'll want to marry her. She's a pretty girl."

The woman smiled sadly again. "Who needs a deaf-and-dumb wife?"

She wiped her tears with the corner of her kerchief and finally set off.

"Wait!" Gegam shouted. He pulled his pouch from his belt and offered her several crumpled bills. "Here, take them. You've far to go, and the money'll come in handy."

"No, thank you, brother. I have enough."

She continued on for several steps, then returned and pulled a thin gold ring with a tiny turquoise bead in it from her finger. "God willing, Tuti will marry. Then give her this ring. And if she dies, put it in her coffin."

Gegam did not know why he walked along with the woman, his eyes on the ground, lost in his own bitter thoughts. He stopped when they reached the place where the willows and poplars ended and sat down on a stone. The Gypsy woman vanished from sight. He sat there for a long time, while a multitude of thoughts passed through his mind. These were thoughts about the world we live in, created so imperfectly by God. His thoughts were jumbled and fleeting. "Why are we to blame? Why were our houses burned, our women ravished, our men killed? Why were we scattered all over the world? And why was Tuti, a girl as lovely as a ray of sunshine, born deaf and dumb? Why are the Gypsies leaving these blossoming orchards, these poplars and willows that blow in the wind to go South, to gather opium under the scorching sun, as not as a flaming forge? And, if one is to be truthful, what sort of a world is this anyway?"

"It's no good!"

His sons entered at the sound of his voice. Sirun followed, wiping her hands on her apron.

"It's no good!" Gegam-airik said. "There are green orchards. And poplars.... And willows heavy from the rain. . . . Khachatur!" he shouted.

"I'm here, Father."

"Go away, everyone. I want to sleep."

Sirun alone could not bring herself to leave the room. In her mind's eye she held onto the hem of the Madonna's robe

and pleaded: "Holy Virgin, don't let Gegam-airik die. Let him live a little longer."

Memory took him back again.

When Gegam returned to the mill he saw that the yard had been swept and watered. Then ... the nights were filled with spring storms. Flashes of lightning snaked over the poplars and the mill, snatching from the darkness the whirling columns of flour dust and Tuti's green eyes as she sat on the stone that was covered with his felt cape.

And love came to them.

The Turks appeared on the far bank again. One of them shouted, "You'd better give us the girl, miller, if you don't want to find your place a-shambles!"

It was twilight and drizzling again. Some peasants had brought their grain by burro from the nearby village of Gadimabad. Gegam stood in the rain, with his arms akimbo, staring at the men in blue pantaloons.

"Come on over!" he shouted. "I'll show you a thing or two!"

One of the peasants was an old man. For some reason or other Gegam decided that he, too, was from Van. Perhaps it was because he seemed exhausted and crestfallen and kept looking back over his shoulder constantly. Why did people keep looking back? After all, God's earth was round, and no matter how much you looked back, you'd only come to see yourself at the end of the journey.

However, the old man was neither an Armenian nor from Van. He had simply brought his grain to the mill together with the other peasants. He sat down under a tree, crumbled some tobacco carefully, tamped and lit his pipe with care and calmly blew out a stream of blue smoke.

"What makes you hang around people like hungry dogs?" he shouted to the men on the other bank. "Why don't you look after your own affairs and your families, you rats!"

The Turks laughed, but they finally left.

Gegam kept looking in on the mill. Tuti sat by the millstones. "I wonder where Rasul is now, he who sold me his crumbling world for six hundred tumans? How fine it is not to be alone in the world," Gegam thought as he gazed into the distance over the old peasant's head. "How fine it is not to be alone in this world. There's Rasul, and the old man who brought his grain in from Gadimabad, and the green-eyed

girl Tuti, who listens to the voices of the world through her long lashes."

Spring was ending. The almond trees had lost their blossoms. Gegam slept on the mill roof. One night he could not fall asleep. The stars winked at each other in the sky. A drunk dervish on the far bank was singing:

"How can I find the road
That leads back home?"

It seemed that day that everything was clear as crystal, light and effervescent. Gegam went down to the river and bathed. Back at the mill he took his black trousers and a white shirt from his trunk, doused his moustache and hair with rose water and said to Tuti, "Let's go to town. There's something we've got to attend to there."

They set out on foot, walking beneath the silvery trees until they reached Kagyz-van. The July sun filtered through the dusty leaves, heightening their heady fragrance.

Gegam took Tuti to Hadji Habi's shop and said to the woman clerk, "When I call for her I want her to be dressed in everything new."

Then he went on to Kagraman-khan's wine cellar. Kagraman was playing backgammon, shaking the dice, rolling them on the board recklessly. Gegam ordered two bottles of wine. He drained one and set the other on the next table. Then he wished everyone luck and headed for the door. He stopped at the threshold, lit his pipe, gazed up at the clear sky and crossed himself thrice. Goodness, what a morning! A regular Van morning!

Tuti had on a new green dress, her hair was combed and lay loosely on her shoulders. Tuti had on green shoes, she had been powdered with pink powder and sprinkled with rose water. Gegam pulled out his pouch and tossed a handful of coins onto the counter.

Now they were walking along the sidewalk. Gegam walked ahead, his hands clasped in back of him. He stopped outside the church and motioned to Tuti to wait for him.

When the service ended Gegam crossed himself and approached Father Hovannes.

"You are late in visiting the Lord's house, Gegam from Van," Father Hovannes mumbled into his beard. "I'll forgive you, but the Lord won't."

"The Lord is merciful," Gegam said and looked about.

The church was empty now. The deacon was putting out the candles.

"I see you've come on business. What is it?"

Gegam bent his head and said softly, "I want to be married in church, Father."

"That's the right thing to do, Miller Gegam. It's about time, too! Is she Kagraman's daughter?"

"No, Father."

"Rateos's sister?"

"No."

"Hm. It must be Shoger then."

"No. She's not a Christian, Father. She's a Gypsy. I snatched her from the lion's mouth, and now I want to marry her."

Father Hovannes was dumbfounded.

"What is your religion, Miller Gegam?"

"Religion?"

"What's your nationality?" Father Hovannes shouted.

"I'm Armenian. I'm a Christian from Van."

"And are there no more Christian girls left in this world?" Gegam watched the white smoke from a snuffed candle curl and rise in a thin column. He pushed his shoulder against the church door and emerged into the street. Fie looked at Tuti, at the church walls and crossed himself. "Father Hovannes is no good," he thought, "but that does not mean that the Church is no good."

"Let's go."

Once again they set out on foot beneath the silvery trees. The July sun had risen high in the sky, shedding both heat and shade upon the earth. The road seemed to sink beneath Gegam's heavy tread.

"The mountains will be blue by the time we get back," he thought.

Twilight was creeping down the mountain-sides as they returned.

Gegam gazed at the peaks. It seemed to him that somewhere on the steep paths among the blackberry bushes that grew on the slopes lost and frightened fawns wandered about in search of their mothers.

The river grew dark. The evening breeze dipped the willow branches into the water and pressed the poplars closer together.

“Let’s go up on the roof,” Gegam said to Tuti. “There’s no grain today. Let the millstones rest.”

They climbed the rickety ladder to the flat roof. Gegam pulled out his pouch and extracted the little gold ring set with a tiny turquoise bead. Tuti held out her ring finger and rested her head on Gegam’s chest. “I’m yours,” the deaf-and-dumb Gypsy girl said in every language of the world.

The nude moon slipped out from behind the mountains and pressed against the tallest poplar.

“By God’s will Khachatur was born in 1931,” Gegam wrote on the inside flap of his Bible. Then he crossed his newborn son three times.

“Sargis was born in 1933.”

“Smbat was born in 1935.”

“By God’s will, my common-law wife Tuti departed this earth in 1936. There was no priest, and no service was read for her. We buried her on a Monday.”

“In the last month of summer, 1939, I took my sons and went to Kagyz-van to buy wine and other goods. When we returned we found our mill destroyed. It was destroyed by the Turks in blue pantaloons.”

“We met the miller Rasul in Teheran. He was drunk and sat by a stream, staring at the water and was probably thinking of his mill. I gave him 5 tumans and said, ‘My ill-fated brother Rasul, I’m taking my sons and going back home to my native land.’”

“In July 1946 we set out for the heavenly land that is called Mother Armenia.”

There was no more space on the page, and so Gegam added the other entries on the margins. He wrote down the dates of his son’s marriages and the births of his grandchildren. After he had filled in the margins he made no more entries.

“You have a lot to remember, Gegam, son of Khachatur,” Gegam-airik thought. “You’ve been across this wide world and have never hurt anyone. You married a deaf-and-dumb Gypsy girl and lived with her for six years. And if Father Hovannes, God rest his soul, was a bad person and considered our marriage illegal, the Lord did not and blessed us with three fine, strapping sons, with three beautiful daughters-in-law and five grandchildren.”

“And is that not enough, Father Hovannes?”

Gegam-airik opened his eyes and once again he saw the Angel of Death standing beyond the curtains. It had a green willow branch in one hand and a scythe in the other.

"I have come, Gegam. . .

"I have done my duty," Gegam said. "As Khachatur-airik did. If you say that Tuti is waiting for me in the world beyond, I will come. But I don't know whatever happened to my unfortunate brother Rasul. And I don't know why people can't find a place for themselves in this great and endless world."

Gegam-airik shut his eyes tight. Tears ran down his cheeks.

It was a bright day in May. In the city of Megri, in his native Armenia, surrounded by his sons, his daughters-in-law and his grandchildren, the miller Gegam, son of the miller Khachatur and a native of Zorants, fell back on the pillows.

*THE CAMELS PASS,
THE MOUNTAINS REMAIN*

Once, long, long ago, there were more camels on earth than ships, planes and automobiles. People travelled by camel from town to town, from village to village, from country to country. Mounted on their camels they fought their enemies, their camels trampled them into the earth.

Camel trading was a honourable profession in those days. Camels were sold. Camels were bought. Camels were set against one another, and people watched them battle in the rolling dust.

Then the price of camels began to fall. A camel became cheaper than a donkey; soon one could buy a camel for a sack of grain, for a pail of apples, and this surprised no one.

Nowadays one can only see a camel, a helpless camel doomed to extinction, in the circus or the zoo.

And if one were to show a modern boy or girl a camel's bone they would think it belonged to a mammoth or a dinosaur, so unusual, strange and fantastic is it.

One day the camels, long-since forgotten and erased from human memory, again walked the streets of the young capital of ancient Nairi.

Their appearance produced a sensation. A great crowd gathered round them, and each person in the crowd was filled with wonder and excitement.

"They're camels!" some said, as if afraid that the camels might turn out to be something else.

"They're humpbacked!" another said, as if there ever had been straight-backed camels.

"They're mad beasts!" another whispered and repeated this to friends, strangers and himself until his own invention seemed the truth to him.

A fourth spoke with the conviction of an eye-witness: "Someone asked one of the camels why its neck was crooked and it replied: 'I'm like that all over.'"

"You don't say?" everyone exclaimed, and there was no end to their wonder and amazement.

Meanwhile, the camels proceeded slowly and solemnly along, indifferent to this noisy admiration, and their bells tinkled ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling.

The asphalt melted in the sun. In the shimmering heat the camel caravan seemed as endless as an ancient eastern song.

The streets converged in the centre of the city, forming a large square. The rules that governed these streets were not to be broken.

The moment the red light changed a stream of pedestrians began to cross.

When the green light changed a stream of cars swished.

Yellow, red and green, all obeyed their blinking.

Then came the camels, their bells tinkling.

Gaik spotted the caravan from his fifth-floor balcony and cried out in surprise. As he raced down the stairs he heard the sound of doors slamming and running feet.

Everyone was in a hurry, afraid to miss the sight.

Children dashed out of the houses and ran after the caravan, jostling each other.

It was vacation time. The schools were out. The children had taken over the city.

There was a moment of confusion in the caravan. Nar, the lead camel, had been angered by something and now stubbornly refused to move. Perhaps his master's indifference, noticeable these past few hours, had enraged him. Perhaps something else had set them against each other. Who was to know?

The long line of camels buckled. Traffic stopped. The heat was unbearable.

Man and camel tried to stare each other down.

Something flashed and died out in their eyes.

Man had conquered.

Ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling, a caravan was coming down the city streets. Vague thoughts tormented both men and beasts.

The young inhabitants of the tall apartment house soon fell behind the crowd, and other children took their places. The crowd followed the camels, never lessening in numbers

but ever changing. The people, like autumn leaves torn from the trees, would collide, part and disappear down the streets and lanes.

Among them all a girl with a pink hair ribbon never fell behind the caravan. She would run, then stop; stop, then begin to run again. Her eyes, wide with wonder, shone with delight.

"What's your name?" Gaik said.

"Anna," she replied without as much as glancing at him. "What's yours?"

"Gaik."

They walked on together.

"How old are you?" Gaik asked.

"Thirteen," she replied, her eyes on the caravan. "How old are you?"

The boy was fourteen, but he said he was thirteen, too, for he did not want to, he could not, surge on ahead of her, leaving her behind.

The camels and the cars had to stop at one of the central thoroughfares to let a funeral procession pass. If this had been in winter, the men would have bared their heads, but this was summer, a scorching summer.

The caravan master forgot to remove his shaggy white sheepskin hat, for he had long since forgotten the rhythms of his native land, its religion and customs.

The band was playing a sad and solemn march. The automobiles of the cortege blew their horns mournfully. Several persons wept and wailed, wailed and wept.

For a second everyone felt helpless and guilty. But it was only for a second.

"What are your marks in geography?" Gaik asked.

"Excellent," Anna replied and smiled.

They had taken such a liking to each other that they were too embarrassed to talk.

"I love the lead camel," Anna said.

"So do I."

They loved the same things and did not know what to do about it.

"Let's embrace the camel!" Anna finally said.

"Let's throw ourselves at its feet!" Gaik said.

But they did neither, for this was not something that people did.

"You can't imagine how I envy his master."

"So do I."

"He can kiss his camel if he wants to, or saddle him, or lead him off to the end of the world."

"He can do anything he wants to!"

"This is the first time I've ever seen such a beautiful camel with so many lovely ornaments," Anna said and sighed.

"I've never seen such a beautiful camel with such lovely ornaments before. Not in the zoo or even in the circus," Gaik said.

For a moment they each forgot about the other's existence and each was carried away by his own excitement.

Then Gaik went over to Nar. He touched the camel, patted its shaggy flank and, surprising himself, pulled out a tuft of hair.

The camel master noticed what he had done. He cast a stern, unforgiving glance down at Gaik, and the boy cringed and turned pale.

Half of the treasure he had gleaned at such cost he gave to the girl, and he presented it to her as timidly and breathlessly as if he were giving her half of his heart.

And the girl accepted this priceless gift as timidly and breathlessly as if it were half of his heart.

Both young and old approached them, pleading for a share, for even a tiny bit of half a heart.

And so they divided their halves into thousands of shares, leaving themselves only one hair apiece.

Suddenly two old women who resembled question marks appeared. They took the last hairs from them and carried them off.

The children looked at each other in confusion, and all that had happened seemed both as real and as unreal as a dream.

Ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling. The camels were departing.

The crowd was departing.

The sun was departing.

The streets and squares became dusty, the air was humid in the houses and under the trees. Evening was descending like hundreds of other evenings.

"I'd give a hundred rubles for a camel's hair!" Gaik said.

"I'd give a thousand rubles for a camel's hair!" said Anna.

"I'd give anything for it," Gaik said and sighed.

"Who wouldn't?" Anna said and sighed.

They were sad, because they had nothing worthwhile to give in exchange for a camel's hair.

An army unit was marching down the street.

This was also interesting.

The camels had gone, and now the children were on opposite sides of the street with a restricted area temporarily between them.

The soldiers marched along smartly, singing a lively song. A girl tossed them a bouquet. The flowers did not reach them and fell near the sidewalk.

The soldiers smiled at the sight of the flowers and marched along, row upon row. Thus did hundreds of soldiers pass. The last one, a blue-eyed youth, stooped, picked up the flowers and, breathing in their fragrance, ran after his comrades.

The restricted area was no more.

"Where have the soldiers gone?" the boy wondered.

"Where have the camels gone?" the girl wondered.

Never before had they felt so sad. They loved camels and thought the camels loved them, too, and would always be there.

But they must have been mistaken about something.

"Which way did the camels go?" the children asked the passers-by and hurried along in the direction indicated.

Thus did they cross the city and find themselves in a deserted outskirt. The sun had long since set. The sky was very high above them. All was silence and peace.

The children crossed a newly-ploughed field. Never before had they seen so much earth, such real, fragrant earth, unlike the earth in flower pots and city squares.

An old man sat on the ground where the road forked off in three directions. It was difficult to say how old he was. Gaik approached him slowly and said, "Have you seen the camels?"

"Yes."

"Which way did they go?" Anna asked impatiently.

"The first road will take you to them more quickly. The second will be longer. The third road leads nowhere," the old man said.

"Which is the first road?"

But the old man did not reply. He was sound asleep.

So they chose one of the roads at random, not knowing that it would not bring them to their goal. Finally, they stopped in exhaustion and looked about. They saw a rock, a bush, a stream. And there, in the distance. . .

“The camels!”

They shouted wildly with joy and ran onward. But after they had taken but a few steps they stopped in their tracks. No, those were not camels. They were the ancient mountains of the ancient land of Nairi, and a caravan of mountains stretched along the horizon from end to end.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

AKSEL BAKUNTS (1899-1937), Armenian classic, was born in Goris, the son of a peasant. His first stories were written in the 20s. These were essays and sketches on peasant life: *A Provincial Letter-Writer, Our Villages, Letters from the Village*, and four collections of short stories: *The Dark Gorge, The Sower of Black Fields, Rain* and *A Nut Tree of Fraternity*.

Towards the end of the 20s Bakunts began two major works, an epic *Karmrakar* and an historic novel *Khachatur Abovian*, both of which were never completed. He did complete a satiric novel entitled *Kiores* (1935) which remains one of the best Armenian satires.

The Alpine Violet is typical of the author's measured manner of story-telling, his lyricism, interest in human relations and keen sense of observation.

DERENIK DEMIRCHIAN (1877-1956). "The people and their happiness are the only correct yardstick, the only correct literary road." Thus did Derenik Demirchian, poet, prose writer, dramatist and satirist, determine a writer's calling.

The son of a poor shopkeeper, he received his training as a teacher in Switzerland, and taught Armenian and Armenian literature in the schools of Tiflis from 1910 to 1922.

Demirchian's first book, *Poems*, was published in 1899. Prior to the establishment of Soviet power in the Caucasus he published poetry, stories and plays. However, he reached his full maturity as a writer in Soviet times. The best of his works, written between 1920 and 1940, are: *Brave Nazar*, a comedy; *The Extra One, Merke* and *Sato*, short stories; *Rashid* and *Nigyar*, short novels; and *Vardanank*, an historical novel. During the last years of his life Demirchian wrote a number of short stories in which he created vivid images of people building a new life.

The Flowering of a Book is one of his philosophical stories which also reflects his poetic thinking.

AVETIK ISAAKIAN (1875-1957). "The poet Isaakian is magnificent; perhaps there is no other talent as bright and sincere in all of Europe today". Thus did the Russian poet Alexander Blok write in 1916.

Isaakian was born in Alexandropole. His first volume of poetry, *Songs and Wounds*, was published in 1898 and brought the young poet immediate recognition. Several other volumes of poetry followed.

Isaakian was arrested in 1908 for his activity directed against the tsarist regime and was imprisoned in Metekhi Fortress in Tiflis. After being released he was forced to emigrate, returning to his native land in 1936.

Isaakian flourished as an author after his return to Armenia, writing poetry and a number of interesting short stories, the best of which include *A Pipe of Patience*, *We Have a Banner*, *Bair am Ali*, *7 he Cherished Oak of Guernica* and others.

The writer devoted much time and energy to journalism. His public appearances and articles were imbued with a sense of patriotism and friendship among peoples.

RAFAEL ARAMIAN was born in Echmiadzin in 1921, the son of an office worker. During the war he graduated from the University of Yerevan (1942) and left for the front the same year. He is one of a number of Armenian writers who began publishing their works soon after the war.

His first collection of short stories, *The Voices of My City*, appeared in 1946. This was followed by other collections and a novel *The Rubinian Brothers*.

Aramian often chooses the intellectual story. He is interested in human emotions and thoughts, in problems of ethics and morality. *She Hook a Pitcher and Went for Water* is dedicated to Komitas, the great Armenian musician and collector of folk songs.

HOVANNES TOUMANIAN (1869-1923), an outstanding Armenian poet and writer. "The poetry of Toumanian is Armenia itself, resurrected and immortalised in poems by a great master." Thus did the Russian poet Valery Briusov write of Toumanian.

Toumanian was born in Lori, the son of a village deacon. He studied at Tiflis Seminary, but a lack of means prevented him from completing his education. During his years at the seminary Toumanian blossomed as a poet, with his first volumes of poetry appearing in the 90s.

Hovannes Toumanian's role in Armenian literature can be compared to that played by Alexander Pushkin in the history of Russian culture. Toumanian's works include poetry, prose, epic tales, fairy-tales, fables and ballads. The writer's prose is notable for its clear-cut story lines, dramatic situations and fine style.

STEFAN ZORIAN (1890-1967), one of the founders of Soviet Armenian literature. Zorian was born in Karaklis, the son of a peasant. His first story, *The Hungry Ones*, was published in 1909. His first collection of short stories appeared in 1919. The title is characteristic of his work: *Sad People*.

Zorian flourished as a writer during the new period in Armenian history which began with the establishment of Soviet power. His short novels *The Chairman of the Revolutionary Committee* (1923) and *The Girl from the Library* (1925) are notable among Armenian prose works on the Revolution and the Civil War. *White City* (1929) deals with the period of socialist reconstruction. In the late 30s Zorian completed *A Mans Life*, an autobiographical novel in which one man's fate was portrayed as an integral part of the fate of the people. There followed *King Pap* (1943) and *Armenian Fortress* (1960), two historical novels, the novel *The Amirian Fatnily* and a great many short stories for adults and children. Stefan Zorian was also known as an excellent translator. He translated into Armenian the works of Lev Tolstoi, Turgenev, Mark Twain and many others.

SUREN AIVAZIAN (b. 1915), a teacher by profession, taught in a village school from 1934 to 1936 and then in a school in Baku. His first short stories appeared in 1937. He then joined the staff of *Kommunist*, where he was in charge of the paper's cultural section. At the outbreak of the war the young writer went off to the front, but he continued writing short stories and sketches on war themes. *The Unfinished Carpet*, his first collection of short stories, appeared in 1947. Aivazian is the author of several collections of short stories and two novels, *The Mountaineers* and *An Armenian's Fate*.

***On the Mountain* describes an event which relates to the period of the Civil War. It shows the author to be a man of compassion and simplicity.**

MOVSES ARAZI (1878-1964) was the son of a peasant. He

entered St. Petersburg Technological Institute in 1899, but was expelled for his active participation in the revolutionary struggle and went back to his native Armenia, where he devoted himself to revolutionary and literary work.

His first story, *Don Karapet's Campaign Against the Land of Clerics*, which appeared in the magazine *March* (The Hammer) in 1906, was an expose of bourgeois nationalism. Other short stories followed. Arazi's stories of this period are mostly allegorical or symbolical vignettes. They are lyrical, but at the same time have a definite social content.

Arazi matured as a writer in Soviet times. His stories written after the Revolution portray the dying-out of the old way of life and the formation of a new type of hero.

The author's major works of the 30s are his short novels *In the Moonlight* and *In the Glitter of the Waterfall*, and his novel *The Flaming Horizon*. During the Second World War Arazi published a collection of stories entitled *The Unconquered* (1943), dedicated to the heroes of the home front. *Israel-Ori*, an historical novel, was the writer's last major work.

Comrade Mukuch (1925) is one of Arazi's best short stories and was highly praised by Maxim Gorky.

RACHIA KOCHAR (1910-1965) was born in Western Armenia and at an early age witnessed the massacre of the Armenians by the Young Turks. In fleeing from the Turks, Kochar's family moved to the environs of Echmiadzin.

Kochar received his education in Soviet Armenia. In the 30s he attended the literary university of the Armenian Writers' Union.

Kochar published his first major work *Vaan Verdian* in 1934. This was followed by *The Journey of Ogsen V as pur* (1937). Both books are about intellectuals and both are markedly lyrical while also reflecting his civic consciousness.

The war and post-war years were the author's most prolific period. As a war correspondent Kochar was an eye-witness of the Soviet people's heroic struggle against the nazis. His essays and short stories of this period comprised three collections: *On the Eve* (1942), *Heroes Are Born* (1942) and *The Sacred Vow* (1945).

All that he had seen and experienced during the war years is reflected in a two-volume novel entitled *Children of a*

Big House (1953-1957), one of the most interesting contemporary Armenian novels.

VIGEN KHECHUMIAN was born in Yerevan in 1916, the son of an office worker. Upon graduating from the Department of History of Yerevan University in 1941 he went to work at Matenadaran, Armenia's greatest depository of ancient manuscripts. He began writing while still a student, but the outbreak of war disrupted his plans.

Khechumian's first collection of historical novellas was published in 1945. The stories are set in the Middle Ages and are based on ancient Armenian manuscripts, legends and tales. Most notable among them are *The Madonna* and *Dawn's Flower*.

Khechumian is known as a short story writer, though his one novel, *A Book of Being* (1967), has met with general acclaim.

MKRTICH SARKISIAN was born in Akhalkalaki in 1924. He left for the front lines immediately after graduating from secondary school. After being demobilised in 1945 he entered a pedagogical institute.

Sarkisian began writing poetry at an early age and then tried his hand at prose. He is the author of two novels, *Life Under Fire* (1963) and *Sentenced by Fate* (1967), three books of poetry and four collections of short stories. Many of Sarkisian's works have been translated into Russian.

Mkrtich Sarkisian was for many years editor-in-chief of *Grakan tert* (Literary Gazette). At present he is the editor-in-chief of Aiastan, the Armenian State Publishing House. MKRTICH ARMEN was born in Leninakan in 1905, the son of an artisan. He graduated from the State Institute of Cinematography in 1932 (Department of Script-Writing).

Armen published *Shirkanal*, his first book of poetry, in 1925. His first short story, *On the Street of Melancholy Souls*, appeared in 1926. To date the writer has published over thirty books, the most notable of which are *Zubeida*, the story of an Azerbaijanian woman's emancipation, *Yekhnar Spring*, the story of the life and ways of the artisans of old Giumri (now Leninakan), and *Yasva*, a book about the heroic toil of the Soviet people in the Urals during the war years.

Armen is also known as a translator and is the author of articles on the theory of literature, language and folk art.

KHAZHAK GIULNAZARIAN was born in Yerevan in 1918. He graduated from the Department of Philology of Yerevan University in 1941. Giulnazarian had his first poem published in a newspaper at the age of 14. His first book appeared when the author was 17. Giulnazarian has written over twenty books for adults and children. A major war novel, *'The Horizon Ended Somewheres*, appeared in 1966. *The Sixth Commandment* is a short story typical of the author's style. SERO KHANZADIAN (b. 1915), the son of a peasant, was a shepherd as a boy. He received his training as an elementary school teacher, graduating in 1934, and worked as a teacher in mountain villages until the outbreak of war in 1941, when he left for active service. Khanzadian was wounded in action several times and received several decorations.

Khanzadian's first book, *The People of Our Regiment* (1949), is about the courageous defenders of Leningrad. It won immediate acclaim. Since then the author has published several novels and collections of short stories, books for children and teenagers. *The White Lamb* deals with moral and ethical values.

GEGAM SEVAN (b. 1926). "My dream has come true! I kept saying that I didn't want to die before I returned to my dative land, before I saw the Armenian nation and the Armenian capital with my own eyes ... and now my dream has come true," Sevan wrote.

Sevan was born in Istanbul and lived abroad for many years. He studied law in Istanbul, then moved to Lybia, where he taught literature. Gegam Sevan was a member of the Communist Party of Lybia.

Sevan is now citizen of Soviet Armenia. He is the author of ten books, five of which have been published in the Soviet Union. Sevan's prose is both romantic and realistic. He admires man, the earth we live on and beauty.

VARDKES PETROSIAN was born in 1932 in the village of Ashtarak. He graduated from the Department of Journalism of Yerevan University in 1954 and has been on the staffs of district and republican youth and children newspapers. He is at present editor-in-chief of *Garun* (Spring) magazine.

Petrosian's first book, *Ballad of a Man*, appeared in 1957 and was followed two years later by *The Last Night*, a collection of short stories. He has since written and published

several other collections of short stories and *I'm Grown Up, Mamma*, a short novel.

All of Petrosian's work is notable for good character studies, real situations and a freshness of style.

GRANT MATEVOSIAN is one of the outstanding writers of Soviet Armenia. He was born in the village of Agnidzor in 1935. In 1959 he graduated from the Department of Philology of Yerevan Pedagogical Institute. He worked as a proof-reader and then as a staff editor of *Grakan terl* (Literary Gazette) and *Sovetakan grakanutium* (Soviet Literature).

Matevosian began writing in 1959. He is the author of three short novels and many short stories, all of which have won the acclaim of the reading public. The characters of his stories are the people of the mountains: shepherds, wine-growers, mowers and blacksmiths. To quote one of the reviews: "One must possess a true gift to transform the mundane into a fairy-tale, to see in man's everyday affairs the poetry which makes it possible to call Matevosian's stories a saga of the Armenian village."

ABIG AVAKIAN was born in Teheran in 1919 and educated at the American college there. Following his graduation he served in the Iranian Air Force.

Avakian came to Soviet Armenia in 1946. He became a member of the Soviet Writers' Union that same year.

His early stories were published in Armenian and Persian magazines, but his first book appeared in Yerevan.

Since 1949 Avakian has published four collections of short stories, two short novels and a novel, *Nazeli Delarian*. He is best known as the writer of short stories in which his gift for description and his knowledge of human nature are best

NORAIR ADALIAN was born in Simferopol in 1936. He graduated from the Department of Philology of Yerevan University in 1958.

His first story appeared in the Armenian magazine *Pioneer*. This was followed by *Don't Look Back* (1963), his first collection of short stories, and *Meat-Pies*, a book for children. In 1965 Adalian published *A Hot Summer* and in 1967 *The Snows of Aragats*, a collection of short stories.

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